

SE FARM MAGAZINE

HD **Hive of activity**

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Beekeepers Vanessa Kwiatkowski and Mat Lumalasi have created their own sweet industry in the most unlikely of places. Monique Hore reports

HIGH ABOVE THE HEADS OF Melburnians and surrounded by skyscrapers, honey bees are busy producing their signature sweet stuff in hives hidden from the rest of the world.

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The hives are part of a collection known as Melbourne City Rooftop Honey, and is the work of beekeepers Vanessa Kwiatkowski and Mat Lumalasi.

The pair tend to more than 70 hives nestled in the city centre and urban fringe within 15km of the CBD. The hives exist as individual boxes or small clusters, sitting above restaurants and office blocks, residential towers and houses. Unbeknown to most, there's a batch of 10 on top of Federation Square.

People and companies act as "hive hosts", volunteering to keep a hive on the roof of their city skyscraper, shop, home or apartment. Other people sponsor a hive, donating \$500 a year to support the cost of building hives and rehoming swarms of bees.

Mat and Vanessa, dressed from head to toe in protective suits, hand scrape the honey from trays, filter it through stainless-steel mesh and pack it straight into jars - often on site if there is a kitchen or food-handling area in the building below.

The couple talks about food metres rather than food miles. At most, the honey travels from the hive

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to Mat and Vanessa's home in Heidelberg in Melbourne's northeast to be packed before it is sent to stores across the city. Nothing is added and nothing is removed. It is all honey, all natural.

"We want a natural product," Vanessa says. "Bees make it best, so why mess with what they've done? That's why our honey will crystallise in winter - it is just that it hasn't been pasteurised. We, as consumers, have become accustomed to looking at perfect things so much now, including honey being clear and soft, that I wanted to bring back what it used to be like."

Mat and Vanessa started Melbourne City Rooftop Honey with one hive in 2010 as a weekend hobby project. Within a year they had enough "hive hosts" and sponsors to set up more than 25 hives across Melbourne. The pair quit their jobs in information technology to take on beekeeping.

While it was an unplanned career detour, it seemed only natural for the couple, who now produce up to 1.2 tonnes of honey a year from up to 3.5 **million** bees during peak season.

"We had to look at it in a different way, not from the traditional beekeeping model where it is all about the honey," Vanessa says. "For us it is all about the bees first, honey second."

The pair visit the hives about 14 times a year to check the health of the bees, leaving them to hibernate during colder months. They harvest each hive two or three times a year.

"We don't harvest them as heavily as traditional beekeeping practices might," Vanessa says.

The couple's urban approach didn't sit well with some in the industry who claimed bees could not thrive in bustling Melbourne. But **business** success soon had naysayers changing their tune.

"The older beekeepers were the most surprised and dismissive about what we were doing," Mat says. "Six months into doing it, there was a bit of a turn around, with some of them telling us how much of a good idea it was."

The urban environment offers bees a huge choice of flowers to pollinate - compared with only a handful of crop varieties in rural areas. As a result, Vanessa says urban beekeeping, which is a hit in international cities including Paris, London, New York and **Hong Kong**, creates a distinct honey flavour.

"Bees forage between two to five kilometres from their hive and, in effect, the honey is a reflection of what is in their local environment," Vanessa says. "People like the idea of being able to sample their suburb or even a street - in the city you have (hives in) Degraes Street, Rankin Lane and Exhibition Street with different flavours."

Related bee products - honey, candles, wax and bee-friendly seeds - are **sold** online and in about 20 stores across Melbourne, including Clementine's in Degraes Street. A food, **wine** and gift store, Clementine's also hosts a hive on its roof. Owner Melanie Ashe said she was fascinated by the project.

"People want to re-connect to the basics, and bees are about as basic as you can get," Melanies says. "Honey itself is a product that resonates with people anyway, but once I say it's from Melbourne and that it is so local that it is literally from upstairs on the roof, their minds are blown. They just don't think that happens in the city."

Educating people about the importance of bees to food production and the threats the industry face is also top of the agenda for Mat and Vanessa. Bees are responsible for pollinating about 65 per cent of Victoria's food produce, and contribute as much as \$6 **billion** to agricultural production every year.

Bee fever is catching in Melbourne with more than 500 people on a waiting list to host a hive. All that is needed is more hands. "We are at capacity at the moment," Vanessa said. "I never imagined this would be my job ever, but it is nice perusing your own passions."

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