

# For The Love Of Honey

Jennifer Berry

*Savannah Bee Company*



Remember the first time you were about to explore the interior of a beehive? The range of feelings coming at you all at once: excitement, fear, joy, anxiety, curiosity, nervousness, delight, and terror. Putting a veil on for the very first time. Wondering if you got all the strings tied right, or what about this gap between your neck and the netting or was your collar high enough in the back or was that hole in your jeans going to be a beacon for these flying creatures with sharp stinging instruments?

Walking out to the apiary with this metal tool in your hand, not having a clue what to do with the darn thing. Watching as the beekeeper lights the smoker and fills the air with smoke, creating this mystical, foggy environment. Moving ever so slowly towards the hive and hearing a faint buzzing sound as you cautiously come in for a closer look. Then a bee buzzes by your head and begins this kamikaze attack mode in your face. You panic, blood pressure rises, sweat beads up on your forehead, images of killer bees covering your body (much like they did in that movie you saw back in the 70s). You start to run but just then the beekeeper touches your arm and in a very calm voice says, "Would you like to see the queen?"

After several hours and numerous colonies the beekeeper is exhausted from all my questions and really wants to go home. But I keep pressing him for more information. I don't want to leave, not yet. Wait, let's open just one more hive, and can you explain again that round dance thing they do or watch bees emerging. And how many drones does the queen mate with? Can we see her again? How long does she live? Just one more hive, please!

A few months ago at the Georgia Beekeepers

Association Spring meeting, I had the opportunity to sit down and talk with Ted Dennard, owner of Savannah Bee Company. We started off the conversation talking about how he became a beekeeper. As he paused to think for a second, he smiled and then started telling me about his first experience in a beehive, the excitement and horror he experienced at the same time.

Ted was 13, living in Brunswick, Georgia, when a friend of the family, Roy Hightower, "Old Roy" as he lovingly expressed, asked if he could put bees on their property. When the bees arrived Ted was immediately interested but also terrified. Hesitant about going into a colony, he put on several layers of clothes to cover every inch of his body. He was not going to get stung. He explained, "When Old Roy first opened the hive, it was almost like watching a scary movie. You want to cover your eyes and look away but you just can't because you don't want to miss a thing." Well, he kept looking. He said as he stood there he was drawn in, totally fascinated by what he was seeing, hearing, and smelling. His fear quickly melted away and fascination took over. Then what he remembers most from that first voyage into a bee's world was the honey frames. He explained as a frame was pulled out of the super, it



*Beeyard at Savannah Bee Companies new warehouse.*



*Savannah Bee Companies trade mark.*

was backlit by the sun. The image was breathtakingly beautiful. He was overwhelmed by the colors of the honey shining through. Then he began to notice the various hues, some amber, some golden, some red. The assortment of different honeys glowing in that beeyard that day opened a door, which would eventually carve a path to the conception of the Savannah Bee Company.

Well Ted's beeyard days didn't end there. His interest continued. Several years after his introduction to bees, Mr. Hightower passed away, leaving the bees for Ted to manage. He was still a novice but did the best he could to keep the bees alive. But then it was time for college and off he went to study Theology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Back home Ted's father tried to take charge of the bees, but a nasty allergic reaction pulled him out of the beeyard, forever. Then mites arrived and the bees perished, but not Ted's fascination.

While in college Ted rented a log cabin from a retired minister/beekeeper, Archie Stapleton, who became Ted's teacher and mentor. "He was extremely smart and knew all the really cool facts about bees. He was also this happy, jolly sort of fellow who loved making wine". Years later when Archie died an incredible story followed. Archie passed while reading a book in his favorite chair. EMS arrived and as they were loading his body into the ambulance, bees filled the entire truck. The EMS workers had to quickly evacuate and wait for the bees to leave. People who witnessed this event were truly amazed at what they saw; the bees just wanted to say goodbye.

After college, Ted volunteered for the Peace Corps and was assigned to work with beekeepers in Jamaica for two years. He worked primarily in the field addressing issues and helping where he could. While there, the Jamaican beekeepers formed an association, which attracted over 130 beekeepers, and Ted worked with them all. Being in Jamaica was glorious but while there he had an epiphany. Years ago "Old Roy" introduced him to the glorious world of the honey bee and now here he was, working in Jamaica, helping beekeepers. The ripple effect made him pause. He realized then it's the small acts that make a difference, one by one that have an impact.

After his return to the states he moved to Flagstaff and Durango. For five years Ted ran a wilderness business called Onshore & Offshore Adventures. It was an awesome concept. He would take school age kids backpacking for a week, exposing them to the wilds of the earth. Next they would stay a week on a Hopi or Navajo reservation giving them a real, cultural experience. Then to end the adventure, they would spend one week on a river trip.



*Recently Savannah Bee Co. took home the grand prize for products entered at the 2010 Flavor of Georgia Food Product Contest.*

It was a grand time, but Ted was anxious for something more in his life. So he traveled to Asia for six months exploring ideas for his future. He loved the multi-cultural, diverse nature of Asia and knew he needed to live somewhere that offered this type of environment. When he arrived back into the U.S. he landed in Savannah. It didn't take him long to realize that Savannah was going to be his home. He quickly started back to beekeeping with five hives. It was a dream of his to turn beekeeping into a full time career but he hesitated. Beekeeping was a hobby that he loved and was extremely passionate about; he didn't want to spoil it. He understood that too often this is the case when you're trying to make a buck. Your passion runs dry with the day-to-day pressures of running a business. It can become more about the profit and less about the product. And making a profit sometimes requires cutting corners.

But he loved producing honey and his few hives were doing such a great job of it. He and his roommate decided to buy an extractor and sell the surplus to surrounding stores. "Bee Buster Honey" was sold in squat, little jars



*Ted inspecting tupelo honey.*





*Ted explaining the honey process to the crew of Food Network.*

with hand painted logos. But it wasn't paying the bills (yet) so Ted worked numerous full time jobs. He was teaching an experiential youth program for the Savannah Board of Education until they lost funding. Next he taught environmental science classes to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders.

But he loved producing honey and slowly but steadily his honey began to sell. Stores started asking for more and then other stores became interested and started asking. The line kept growing. However, for the business to expand, this meant more equipment, more bees, and more time in order to meet demand, so off to the bank Ted traveled. His initial business loan was \$13,000. This enabled him to buy 50 hives, a truck and a trailer. The following year he made his first crop of tupelo, and gallberry honey; the Savannah Bee Company was born. As more stores kept asking for more honey, the business moved from the kitchen, to the garage to an 800 square foot space at the Oatland Island Wildlife Preserve. Yet, he still had to work numerous other jobs to pay off the note from the bank. He resurfaced bathtubs, flipped houses, removed bees, was a Mr. Fix-It man, and beekeeper.

It was a crazy time and the requests for his product kept growing. Swankier stores started calling and demand was rapidly growing, but his "time" was the limiting factor. So he decided to take the plunge in December of 2001 and make the Savannah Bee Company his one and only job.

Just three years after he bought his first round of production hives, Ted walked down the road called "Dream Job Lane". Ok, that was corny.

He headed west for a short course in business, mortgaged the house and decided to give the Savannah Bee Company everything he had for 12 months. In 2002 Ted started displaying at gift shows. In 2003 Williams-Sonoma approached him and asked for his product. Shortly later Dean & DeLuca, Nieman-Marcus, and Bloomingdale's followed. He moved into a warehouse and in four short years outgrew it, so had to buy an even bigger warehouse. Demand continued to outpace supply and by 2004 he started packing honey because he just couldn't do all the honey production and extraction himself.

In 2007 the Savannah Bee Company was honored with the Georgia Small Business of the Year Award given by the U.S. Small Business Administration. This year they won the grand prize at the Flavor of Georgia Food Product Contest. And the accolades keep mounting.

Having that charitable soul of his, the Savannah Bee Company has partnered with the Heifer International, "helping people to help themselves." They're selling Honduran honey which is part of the Heifer Beekeeping projects. It is labeled "Peace Honey" and \$3 from each bottle sold is donated to Heifer.

In nine years, after risking everything, Ted has cre-



*One of many production lines at the Savannah Bee Co.*



*Ted's honey filling operation.*

ated a multi million-dollar company. If you haven't seen the products Savannah Bee Co. offers, check them out and you will understand why the company has become so successful. Ted's marketing savvy took honey to a different dimension. He removed honey from the pick-up truck tailgate, and placed it into the halls of culinary sophistication. For decades honey has languished in quart jars on the shelves of roadside stands and farmer's markets. Savannah Bee Co. discarded that image and raised honey into the ranks of that of a fine wine or cheese. From the logo to the elegance of the French style wine bottle, the presentation of Savannah Bee Company's honey sets it



*While in the peace corp Ted worked with 100's of beekeepers in Jamaica.*

apart from the rest.

But is it the only reason this company is flourishing? Partly, but more importantly, Ted loves what he does. His passion for bees and their products, his hunger to learn more, to do better, to give back, and to create something new, all play into his success. And maybe a tad bit of luck: being at the right place at the right time? But remember, it takes a lot of sweat equity to get to that right place at the right time.

And too, he keeps looking.

See Ya! **BC**

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