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## Hotel's rooftop honey joins the lineup of locally produced menu offerings

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When the south end of an agitated bee is pointed in his direction, Sean Curry knows it's time to back off.

That's something the executive chef at the Chicago Marriott Naperville came to appreciate not very long ago. It was part of the learning curve when Curry expanded his resume to include beekeeper. And he's only been stung a couple of times.

"Before I started this, I was the guy who swatted bees," said Curry, who tended up to 120,000 bees over the season that ended with the final harvest of honey Thursday afternoon.

When he established a house apiary at the northeast Naperville hotel, Curry took the current restaurant trend toward hyper-local food sourcing up a notch — straight up. The inn's roof is home to four hives, each of them lined with wax-filled frames where in the heat of the summer some 25,000 to 30,000 insects work their sweet magic.

It isn't much of a stretch to call them busy bees. Toiling feverishly for their entire seven-week lifespans, the worker bees — that's all of them except the queen and several dozen males, whose sole purpose is to entertain the queen — continually build up the wax, eating and regurgitating until their work is done.

"Once the honey and pollen ratio is perfect — and I mean literally perfect — they cap it off," said Curry, who has collaborated with pastry chef Erica Tomei to use the 200-plus pound yield in ways that best spotlight its lush, dynamic flavors.

The perfection came in an abundance that exceeded the kitchen crew's hopes. They expected this summer's heat and lack of rain would hinder production in the hives, as it did for many other local beekeepers, but that didn't happen.

"It was a surprisingly good year for us," said Curry just after making the season's last "pull" — beekeeper speak for honey harvest.

Variety is the spice

Curry gives credit for the sticky bumper crop to the plethora of pollen to be pulled from Morton Arboretum in Lisle, just a mile and a half or so east-northeast of the Marriott as the bee flies.

The acclaimed outdoor museum offers a tempting menu for creatures that fancy flowers, serving up floral fare well beyond the usual clover blossoms that provide a dietary staple for many of their species.

It's not that there's nothing to eat at the home hives. Early in the season the hotel staff set up a limited selection of edibles, including basil and a few annuals, but they wanted to avoid creating homebody bees.

"We don't want to feed them too well, because then they won't go out and find flowers," Curry said.

It's a delicate balance, keeping the apiary just homey enough. Assisted by sous chef Kyle Thorson and other members of the kitchen staff, the chef is strategizing ways to minimize the loss of bees when winter sets in and the hives could see their populations shrink to one-quarter their midsummer peak. Some form of insulation might show promise.

And when the last hard freeze has passed, Curry said, he'll start feeding the survivors in each colony a little sugar water to build their strength while they await spring's first blossoms.

"As soon as you get pollen, they'll go out foraging," he said.

### Local trend

The newly reopened hotel's honey isn't the only hyper-local game in town. At the Hotel Arista — like the Marriott, an eco-conscious inn that has garnered the esteemed Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification — a chef's garden alongside Route 59 has become a summer source for what goes on the table.

"Wherever we could use it, whether we had parties going on, whatever dishes we could incorporate it into, we did," said food and beverage manager Joe Mayor — who, like Curry, wears a secondary hat, that of lead gardener. "It all made it out from the garden to the kitchen to the guest."

The garden goods included more than a dozen varieties of tomatoes, an array of peppers, plus sweet corn, radishes, squash, pumpkins, watermelon and herbs. Mayor started much of the tomato and pepper crop in flats at his home in Montgomery. Come February, he plans to do it again.

The head of foodservice at North Central College appreciates the value of homegrown goods, too. A dozen of the 26 garden plots the college maintains between two of its houses on Loomis Street are used to raise fresh goods that are served in Kaufman Dining Hall.

"Before the season, we plan with the head chef and decide what things that he wants us to plant, and how much, and that all goes to him," said Brittany Graham, the college's sustainability coordinator.

The remaining 5-by-20-foot plots are offered to faculty, staff, students and other people in the community.

"They can have a whole plot, a half. They can plant just one thing if they want," Graham said. "I had a student ask, 'Can I just plant one tomato plant?'"

Equipped with rain barrels and a compost bin, the little campus farm is worked by volunteer faculty, staff, students and neighbors.

"The garden's been a good learning tool for students to help them learn about composting and harvesting," Graham said.

### A matter of taste

Many of those who strive to source their diets locally insist food produced nearby just tastes better. It's likely been off the vine for less time than what comes from the supermarket.

“People are always excited when you tell them, ‘This is something that I grew,’” Mayor said. “It adds freshness to the food.”

Curry said it would make no sense to mess very much with the Marriott’s honey. An early plan to offer ribs slathered with honey-infused barbecue sauce was scrapped because it just wouldn’t do justice to the delicate flavors that come of the bees’ hard work, he said. Patrons do have the option of sampling a slice of comb straight from the hive alongside the selections on their cheese board. And Tomei has devised a variety of toothsome showcases for the honey, from lush white chocolate-cloaked honey truffles to a delicate honey shortbread that has quickly become a favorite.

“I like to reap the benefits of it,” she said, ticking off honey-centric creations that include cheesecake, ice cream and a honey-spiked whipped cream for the season’s pumpkin pies. “Why wouldn’t I want to work with something so special?”

And it’s local. The word now carries significant cachet, but does often translate to better-tasting as well.

“When you buy the stuff at the grocery store,” Curry said, “let’s face it, it takes like corn syrup.”

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