

FEATURE

Honey harvest

Sweet, golden ambrosia. Everyone knows what's inside the jar. But what's behind a jar of honey? *Swiss News* gets some first-hand insight.

By Gail Mangold-Vine | When young British beekeeper Paul Foley asked me to come along on a honey harvest I didn't imagine I'd have to wear a bee suit. Of course, in retrospect, I don't know what I was thinking: maybe that I would be able to stand in my street wear and take notes from a guaranteed bee-proof distance, or sit in the car parked near the hives, observing from behind tightly closed windows.

But for Paul things were clear. He had to get in the year's third and last harvest of honey on this very, very, very hot August day in Vaud. His pal and assistant-for-the-endeavour Martin Kevill, owner of a company called Classic Car Services, was going to help him. I would be tagging along for a full immersion in beekeeping.

And all three of us were definitely going to wear bee suits. Well, a proper bee suit is either pants and a jacket or a boiler suit, but what Paul had on hand were loose-fitting, pullover bee smocks with elasticised waistband and cuffs, and integrated hood and veil. Along with these were three pairs of leather bee gloves with cloth uppers that went halfway up your arms. Except for the brown leather of the gloves and the black synthetic netting on the veil, all of this was white.

What, no bee pants?

Ummm ... No bee pants, thought I, looking down at the bare flesh on my feet, left uncovered by my ballerina flats. I was also nervous about my wide trouser legs; not for nothing do bee pants have elasticised cuffs.

Having once, in a forest with my Labrador Jack, stumbled on a hollowed-out tree trunk containing a wild bee or wasp colony and awakened the full buzz of their ire, I knew that these critters love to crawl inside your clothes. I remembered how Jack had hopped "Yelp! Yelp! Yelp!" from the forest, with me howling "Help! Help! Help!" and running as fast as I could beside him. A furious horde kept circling around and stinging us both mercilessly. They got under my T-shirt, inside my shorts ... Do you know what it feels like to have a wasp in your knickers? You don't want to find out, believe me.

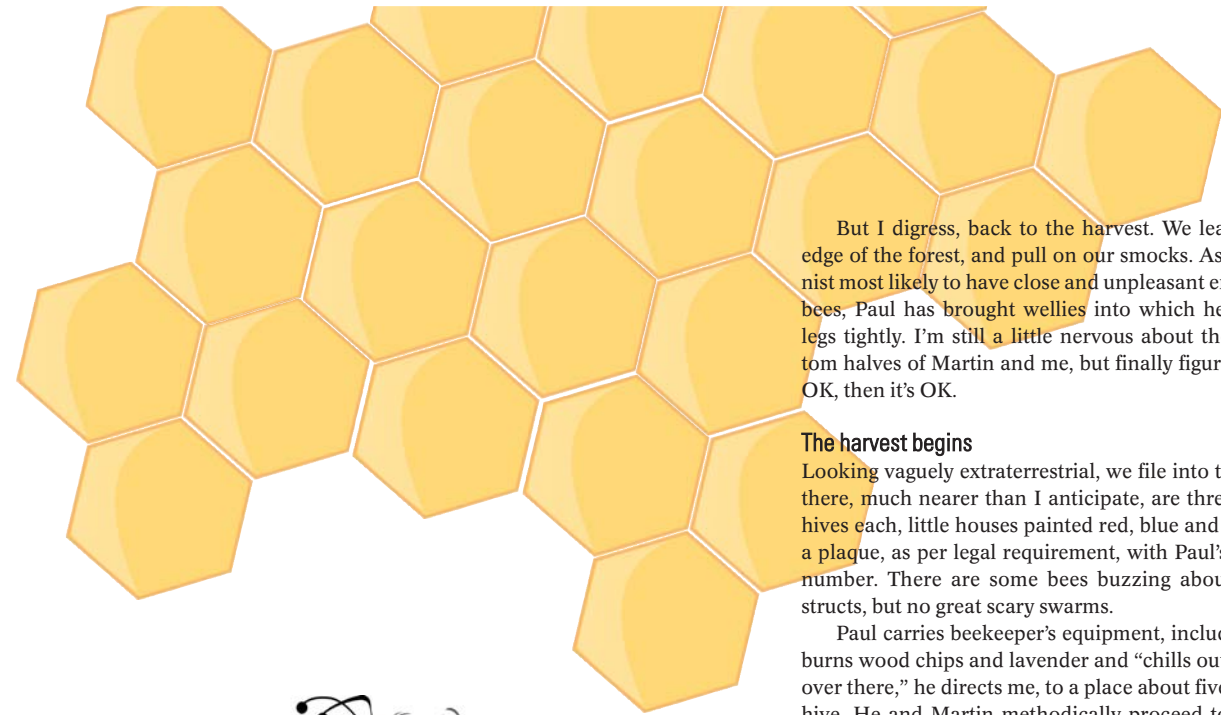
"We'll put this gear on when we get there," said Paul, halting my mental replays of the terrible incident, and we headed for the cars. It was a short drive from Paul's house to the nine hives he keeps in a bit of cool forest surrounded by farmed fields.



I got to ride with Martin in his gleaming TR3 1959 Triumph; top down, so low-slung I could reach down and touch the road (before we set off, that is). When we did, there was that glorious feeling of powerful acceleration and speed, albeit not to the car's max of 180 km/hr. It was fun, even better on the return trip, heads turning, startled, as we roared past wearing our bee outfits.



Martin and Gail ride in style



But I digress, back to the harvest. We leave the cars at the edge of the forest, and pull on our smocks. As the main protagonist most likely to have close and unpleasant encounters with the bees, Paul has brought wellies into which he stuffs his trouser legs tightly. I'm still a little nervous about the unprotected bottom halves of Martin and me, but finally figure if Paul thinks it's OK, then it's OK.

The harvest begins

Looking vaguely extraterrestrial, we file into the forest. And just there, much nearer than I anticipate, are three clusters of three hives each, little houses painted red, blue and green and bearing a plaque, as per legal requirement, with Paul's name and phone number. There are some bees buzzing about these little constructs, but no great scary swarms.

Paul carries beekeeper's equipment, including a smoker that burns wood chips and lavender and "chills out" the bees. "Stand over there," he directs me, to a place about five feet from the first hive. He and Martin methodically proceed to remove the roof, then remove the frames of honeycombs aligned underneath, slot them into another box, and carry the box to the car.

This creates little upset, as most of the bees are not in the "attic" with the combs, they are in the "house" below it – their residential quarters.

"If I can carry a box by myself, know that I'm disappointed with the amount of honey there is," Paul says. Only two of six boxes (Paul had already gathered the honey in the other three) require Martin's help to carry, so overall it's not a great harvest. Paul puts this down to the cold rainy spells we had been having when the bees couldn't go out and gather.

Beekeeping 101

Facts fly from Paul as he works. A normal bee's lifespan is six weeks. The act of stinging causes a bee (albeit not a wasp) to die. A queen bee can live up to three years. After an initial foray to mate with as many male bees as she can, a queen retires to her quarters and lays eggs there for the rest of her lifespan. Any female bee fed lots of royal jelly can grow up to become a queen.

A beekeeper's year looks like this: put the honeycomb frames back in the houses in April, wait for the bees to fill them and then a first harvest in June. Repeat this with a July harvest, then again for the third and final August harvest. "If the altitude were higher here, I'd only have two harvests per year, and up in the mountains they only get one," Paul says.

August after the harvest and again in October is when Paul carries out disease control measures in the hives. Then things quiet down over the winter months when the bees left in the largely empty hives – each one, when full, can house up to 20,000 of them – hunker down in grape cluster position around the queen bee to protect themselves as best possible from the cold.

Paul's bees produce honey from whatever is planted in the fields just outside this shady space – this year it was colza honey in the spring, and now it's sunflower and clover. And in between? There was nothing honey-worthy in the fields, he says, so the bees combed the forest itself yielding *miel de forêt*.

Daring rewarded

As Paul and Martin worked, the bees were generally good-natured about their activity. Only once did the atmosphere get a little charged with some angry diving, darting and buzzzzzzing, and



three headed over my way, circling around my head menacingly.

"Make sure that veil stays well off your face," Paul cautions, adding that I should see what it's like on an ornery bee day when so many of them cover his veil that he can only see through a few tiny spaces here and there between bee bodies.

This being a pretty mellow bee day, the insistent trio soon moves off, and in a little over an hour we're back at Paul's where he and Martin transport the boxes full of honeycombs down to Paul's processing facility in the basement.

Before Paul starts removing the wax from the honeycombs and placing the frames in his spiffy new Italian stainless steel centrifuge, there's some time out on his terrace. In the shade of a massive kiwi bush heavy with fruit – divested of bee smocks – we enjoy a snack of fresh sweet braided bread with goat's cheese and peppercorns drizzled with some of Paul's sunflower and clover honey. Another bonus of this day besides the rides in Martin's car: the heavenly deliciousness of this snack.

From honeycomb frame to jar

And then it's back to work for Paul, scraping the wax covering the honey off some 20 frames, and lining the frames up in the centrifuge. He turns it on, and it spins so fast the machine starts hopping about even though it's fastened to a wooden palette, so all three of us climb on the palette to weigh it down. Through the transparent lid of the centrifuge we can see how honey is hurtling out of the honeycombs and hitting the sides of the machine, from where it drips down through a filter and into a large gleaming pail below.

When the pail is nearly full, Paul carries it over to another receptacle and empties it in. He then takes a sterilised labelled jar, opens the tap at the bottom of the receptacle, and luscious deep amber honey pours forth. "You guys don't have allergies, so this is okay," he says, stressing that normally he would let the jars sit for a few days during which remaining pollen rises to the top and is then scraped off.

No heating though – Paul sells his honey raw. (Heating pasteurises it, but also causes a great deal of the goodness, something like 20 per cent of the vitamins, to be lost.) It is the best honey I've ever eaten, bar none.

Paul will continue de-waxing and centrifuging until the entire harvest is processed and in jars. Then, it's time to market, which he does to a list of private clients, a few niche stores and via his website www.1279honey.com.



Paul at one of his hives

© Photos courtesy of Paul Foley

Beekeeping basics

Originally from Derbyshire in the United Kingdom, 37-year-old IT developer Paul Foley moved to Vaud in 2001. He first took up beekeeping four years ago. "I wanted to learn French, and I happened to see a beekeeping demonstration that quite interested me. I figured taking a course with the local beekeeping society was as good a way as any to develop my language skills."

His French improved – and he was sold on beekeeping. After completing the course, Paul bought equipment and bee colonies of his own, and has been producing honey under his label "1279" (the area code of the place where his hives are located) ever since.

If you are interested in beekeeping, Paul recommends you contact www.bienen.ch if you're in German-speaking Switzerland (including Graubünden); www.abeilles.ch if you're in the French-speaking part of the country; and www.apicoltura.ch in Ticino. They can advise on which local bee club to contact near you.

You'll have to join, and take a basic course. It costs something like 2,000 francs (including the price of the course, equipment and bees – no licenses needed although you do have to register your hive with the cantonal veterinary office) if you want to forge out on your own and join the 19,000 other beekeepers in Switzerland who together manage some 170,000 hives.