

## Getting to Know Italian Honey

Vincenza Lisi (July 21, 2013)



Honey is born of a magic interaction between bees and beekeepers, with the aid of a third partner the environment. The best honey, any excellent honey, is always the final result of this three-way collaboration.

A food derived from gathering and cultivation, honey has accompanied, often behind the scenes, the history of Italian nourishment from the remote past to our days. Used by the Etruscans as a votive offering, honey was mentioned for the first time by the Romans in detailed descriptions of its



culinary usage, which was that of a sauce for savory dishes.

Only pepper, garum (a sauce made of fish) and olive oil outranked honey as basic ingredients for preparing dishes. It was also used as a dressing for boiled fish and a flavoring for egg dishes.

As the centuries progressed, so did the uses of honey in the kitchen, and it ended up ennobling beans on the lordly tables of the Renaissance and also in the stews of the peasants. In the Baroque age, what may be called "the structures of taste" began to evolve toward a new equilibrium and honey, and other sweetening ingredients, disappeared from the main dishes to be confined to the dessert category.

Today, in Italian cuisine, honey is mostly used in sweets, from pastries to torrone, traditional sweets like panforte and fritters. Honey is a favored ingredient in southern cuisine, as the Southern part of Italy has experienced the strong influence of the Arabs whose palates have a preference for sweet and sour combinations. A spoonful of honey can sweeten a glass of tea, turn a plain piece of bread into a treat, glaze a delicious barbecued sparerib, or serve as the basis for an unforgettable salad dressing.

For the ancients, honey was the food of the gods, for us too, honey is an extraordinary food in many aspects. Each kind presents the aromas and flavors of a different floral source, ranging from the scent of the coastal regions found in a spoonful of eucalyptus honey to the bitterish tang of the forest encapsulated in chestnut honey. In Italy the varieties are many, and the most important varieties are - Acacia, Citrus and Orange blossom, Chestnut, Eucalyptus, Sunflower, Honeydew and Dandelion.

Production is rather small but of the highest quality so that these honeys are simply distinct in flavor, color, and consistency... a real find.

Each region has its specialty and here you can find a more complete description.

#### Orange Blossom honey of Sicily

Even before the fruit became edible, Sicily was covered with orange trees; it is

recalled in this way by Arab writings around the year one thousand, when the refined occupants of this land decided to import orange trees as decorative plants. In winter, when the trees are loaded with fruits, they are an explosion of brightly colored dots all over the trees. In striking contrast to the intense visual experience before the harvest is the delicacy of blossom time, in March and April. Orange blossoms are pure white and honeybees are strongly attracted to them, as they are so rich in nectar as they are highly perfumed, their corollas literally overflowing. In their gathering, the bees are unable to resist the attraction to other citrus blossoms, such as those of the tangerine and the lemon, and a small portion of nectar is inevitably mixed with that of the orange. If the disproportion between flavors is strong, the honey is called citrus honey and it is equally fine.

Orange blossom honey crystallizes a few months after having been gathered, and is very light, almost white in color. The intense fragrance is of course reminiscent of orange blossoms, while the flavor is a fusion of aromas recalling both the flower and the fruit. Excellent in sweets or mixed with yogurt, it is just as good spread on bread or used to sweeten tea.

#### Acacia honey from the Prealps

The Acacia is considered an invading plant by botanists. Thanks to its rapid growth and great capacity for adaptation, the acacia grows wild in a vast range of soils... and it has basically taken root almost everywhere in Italy. In the Prealps it forms real forests, sometimes covering hundreds of



hectares.

For beekeepers, the acacia is a vitally important tree; from its blossoms the bees produce an abundance of precious honey. The flowering of the acacia trees is luxuriant, providing a striking spectacle. The bees dive repeatedly into the calyxes overflowing with nectar, dedicating themselves to this activity from morning to night without a pause for ten days or so, the blossoming time.

Acacia honey, one of the clearest in color, remains liquid regardless of the temperature or its freshness (it very rarely crystallizes). The fragrance is light, the flavor delicate and very sweet, with a hint of vanilla.

A honey universally liked, it is particularly suitable for use as sweetener since it does not change the taste of the substances it is added to.

#### Chestnut honey from Calabria

In Calabria the chestnut tree represents the unknown part of the region, the one far from the sea and best-preserved, wilder and richer in memory. Here the woods cover great stretches of land far from roads, protected against pollution and populated in summer by swarms of bees intent on gathering nectar.

The chestnut trees bloom, depending on the altitude, in the months of June and July. The chestnut blossom, not particularly beautiful, is a long, yellowish cluster with a sharp smell, sticky to the touch, rich in pollen and nectar. Bees seem to go crazy when they find chestnut blossoms, becoming excited and even aggressive around the hive. Every day they collect the nectar fervently, even in the dark, after sunset.

Chestnut honey is rich in fructose and crystallizes only after a long time. Dark in color, ranging from brown to black, it has a strong, intense smell, woody and slightly tannic (due to the tannin in the tree). Impalpable grains of chestnut pollen, can be found in the honey. The flavor is decidedly particular, not very sweet and with an almost bitter aftertaste, highly appreciated by those who are not fond of sweets.

It is a perfect honey for delicious contrasts, splendid with aged cheeses or hearty meat dishes.

#### Eucalyptus honey from Sardinia

Although the eucalyptus tree is native to Australia, it has adapted magnificently to the Mediterranean macchia, especially along the coasts, thanks to its resistance to salt air and wind. In Sardinia this tree grows in real forests, both in the interior of the region and on the coast, and it blooms from June to August. The scent that emanates from the eucalyptus is almost balsamic. The blossoms present soft, silky stamens enclosed within a woody case which attract many voracious honeybees.

Eucalyptus honey has a color that ranges from light amber to beige with grayish tones. Its fragrance is intense, distinctive and recognizable, and the flavor recalls the taste of caramel, but is more refined. This is a special honey, excellent as a table honey for those who like its taste.

#### Millefiori honey from Tuscany

Gentle or harsh, the Tuscan hills revel in all the tomes of green, frequently contrasting with the warm brown of the soil. In the early spring the woods and meadows fill with a thousand different flowers: the first are crocuses and primroses, then come the dandelions, sage, melilot and clover, thistles, the locust and the blackberry bush. Then come the blossoms of fruit trees such as the cherry, the



apricot, the apple and the almond as well as the chestnut. And of course, sunflowers, that suddenly decorate the loveliest corners of the region. And there are hundreds and hundreds of other flowers, but these seems to be the most loved by the honeybees because they are the richest in nectar.

Millefiori honey from Tuscany has as many subtle tones of taste as are the different combinations of flowers visited. Each millefiori honey has a special taste, fragrance, and color. A lover of this honey can become a true connoisseur of it, and learn to recognize the variations it takes on from one season to another; because a millefiori honey is a summary of all of the different components of a landscape. The more varied is its nature, encompassing a range of plants and flowers, the more complex and rich will be its overall aroma. Millefiori honey is also produced in Emilia Romagna.

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