

THE BEE'S KNEES

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MEET UNION STREET HONEY, THE COOP'S MOST LOCAL PRODUCT

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By Liz Yap

Photographs by Michael Berman

A few doors down from the Coop, urban beekeeper Jonathan Derow tends to his rooftop hives, harvesting honey and supplying shops around Brooklyn with liquid gold. It's the most hyperlocal product the Coop sells, and it's named after its point of origin: Union Street Honey.



Jonathan Derow in full gear, including leather gloves and veil, next to his four hives.

Derow began his beekeeping journey in 2011, months after it became legal in New York City. "I'd always been interested in honeybees, and it seemed like a good family activity. My son was 12 at the time. You want to find something kids are going to be interested in that you can do together," Derow said. Along with his wife Janice and their son Jaxon, they took a free class offered by an apiarist named Jim Fischer. He

taught them the basics of beekeeping and bee behavior; the rest they've learned by doing, starting with one hive and eventually expanding to four.



Derow examines a frame of honey.

Urban beekeeping involves a vertical, modular setup: a stack of wooden boxes with removable frames, known as a Langstroth hive after the 19th-century apiarist who invented it. Bees build their honeycomb across these frames, filling the cells with nectar, fanning the cells with their wings to evaporate excess moisture, then sealing each cell with wax.

IN THE SPRING, THEIR MAIN SOURCE OF NECTAR IS LINDEN TREES. "THERE'S PLENTY FOR THEM TO FORAGE ON. THEY GO TO PROSPECT PARK OR TO THE BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN."

Through the sheer wonder of nature, bees instinctively know when the honey is ready, dehydrating the nectar until the moisture level is below 18.5%, which is essential to the sticky condiment's famously long shelf life. "It will never go bad as long as the water content is below 18.5 percent," Derow noted.

He estimated that their hives house around 250,000 bees, which can produce up to 40 gallons of honey in a good year. The itinerant insects typically collect nectar within a two-mile radius of their hives. "When I'm walking on the street and I see a honey-bee—more than likely, it's one of my bees." In the spring, their main source of nectar is linden trees, of which there are many in the neighborhood. "There's plenty for them to forage on. They go to Prospect Park or to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden."



Derow uncapping a frame of honey.

Harvesting is a full-day process. Derow, now retired from his career as an art conservator, extracts honey in the same room in his home where he once preserved works of art. The frames are removed from the boxes, brought down one flight of stairs and placed in a centrifugal extractor, which can handle six panels at a time. Sitting on a stand, the extractor has a valve to fill jars with the fresh yield.



A frame of honey, hive tool in hand.

Derow and his wife collect honey twice a year, in the beginning of July and the end of September, timed to preserve distinct seasonal flavors. Like wine, the beauty of honey is its terroir, its characteristic sense of place. The spring honey produces a very unusual flavor from linden nectar—"bright, floral, with a slightly minty finish"—as well as a lighter yellow hue. "When I started keeping bees, I didn't know anything about linden. I just noticed that if I extracted in the early summer, the honey had a particu-

lar color and flavor. I learned from talking to other beekeepers that it was because of the linden trees. If you harvest at a certain time, you'll always get that flavor."

THE FALL HONEY IS AVAILABLE IN OCTOBER, TYPICALLY SELLING OUT BY DECEMBER. THE NEXT HARVEST ISN'T UNTIL JULY. "WHEN IT'S DONE, IT'S DONE."

This is what sets locally sourced honey apart. It's beautifully unique, not uniform. Derow draws comparisons between honey and orange juice. "They blend lots of different varieties to make Tropicana, so it always tastes like Tropicana. You can do that with honey, and with most commercial honey, that's what you're getting—blends from not just hundreds of different hives, but hundreds of different apiaries in many different states. It tastes like honey, but honey doesn't taste like that. Honey tastes of the place."

It's why Union Street Honey isn't always available on Coop shelves. A seasonal harvest can yield 40 to 80 cases, and they supply to several stockists around the neighborhood, including Sahadi's and Brooklyn Larder. The fall honey is available now, typically selling out by December. The next harvest isn't until July. "When it's done, it's done."



APIARISTS MUST ALSO CONTEND WITH THE VAGARIES OF WEATHER—THE GREATEST CHALLENGE IS HELPING BEES SUCCESSFULLY MAKE IT THROUGH WINTER. BOTH VERY COLD AND UNUSUALLY MILD SEASONS CAN THREATEN A COLONY.

Beekeeping is time-consuming, often physical work. The boxes that house the honey-filled frames are heavy, each weighing as much as 70 pounds. Even in scorching weather, Derow works in long pants that he tucks into socks, wearing gloves and a protective veil. (For all their reputation as winged stingers, bees aren't naturally aggressive. Getting stung is uncomfortable but manageable, he said; what you want to avoid is the swelling and itching that inevitably follows.)

Apiarists must also contend with the vagaries of weather—the greatest challenge is helping bees successfully make it through winter. Both very cold and unusually mild seasons can threaten a colony. Frigid temperatures can decimate a hive; warmer and shorter winters can make bees use up more energy and burn through their stored honey before spring blooms emerge. This year, only two of their hives survived.

And yet, losing a colony is simply part of the process. An entire hive can fail for reasons besides weather, ranging from external elements (dreaded parasites) to internal factors (an unproductive queen). Even the most experienced beekeeper can do everything right and still open up a hive in spring to find it no longer abuzz. As he put it, "It's disappointing, it's frustrating. But many hives in the wild don't survive. That's the way it works." In nature as in life, recover from the sting of failure. Clean up the hive. Get more bees. Begin again.

Anecdotally, he shared that most people who get into beekeeping as a hobby don't usually last more than five years. "It's a very confusing, complicated thing to learn how to do," he said. "Most likely, in the first few years, you're not going to get much

honey. Your hive is probably going to die at least once.”

One key to success is tapping the beekeeping community, a hive mind of knowledge that is generous with its time and expertise. “Most of us learned from someone else who didn’t take money for it,” Derow said. “Jim Fischer mentored me and a lot of other people. I feel a responsibility to mentor others who are starting out. Having someone else who has done it at least a few more years than you have is really a huge help.”

For all its demands, beekeeping is equally rewarding. Part of the appeal of this apiarian endeavor is that it’s an ongoing education. “You never feel like you really have a handle on what’s going on. You’re always learning.” After 15 years, Derow is both mentor and student, and he still enjoys looking after his hives. What he finds most fulfilling is sharing their honey harvest—with friends, family, neighbors, even their mail carrier and UPS driver—and seeing other people appreciate something he helped create on his own rooftop. What could be sweeter than that?



Derow holding a nearly capped frame of honey.

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SQUAD 1 FIREFIGHTER IS A DEVOTED COOP FAN!

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By Hayley Gorenberg

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James McHugh is a New York City firefighter with Squad 1 and a beekeeper with a taste for the Coop's chipotle mayo. ("And the hummus is very good, too!") He pops by to shop as a member of a unique group of Coop "permanent guest" members—the cadre of firefighters at the firehouse next door, on Union Street.

NOT ONLY DOES THE COOP FEED THE FIREFIGHTERS TODAY, BUT IT TURNS OUT THAT, A HALF-CENTURY AGO, THE COOP WAS KEY TO SQUAD 1'S VERY SURVIVAL.

McHugh, 37, gave an interview while on the road during vacation. He enthusiastically carved out a bit of time to reflect on how much he enjoys the special relationship Squad 1 has with the Coop.

Not only does the Coop feed the firefighters today, but it turns out that, a half-century ago, the Coop was key to Squad 1's very survival. As Engine 269, the firehouse closed in the early 1970s. Park Slope activists rallied, and it reopened in 1977 as Squad 1.

"So, the only reason we really exist," said McHugh, "is because of the community."

Now Squad 1 and the Coop are old-timers in the area, he observed. "The only people left on the block that are original are the Coop, the firehouse and Dixon's bike shop!"

A DAY AT THE COOP





James McHugh and his 8-year-old son John shopping at PSFC

Day-to-day, Squad 1 firefighters vary widely in their use of Coop shopping privileges. “Some people never go next door. But a lot of our younger firefighters are aware of good, organic produce and not-garbage food,” McHugh said. “The Coop has things nobody else has, which is nice.” And McHugh appreciates the quality: “It’s all good stuff. It doesn’t have filler in it. Where we work, you have good restaurants and you have good supermarkets. In a poorer neighborhood, a food desert, the firemen are in the food desert also.”

Though McHugh professed he was “never really much of a chef,” he has learned over time. “You pick up on other people’s meals. A guy will make jerk chicken; I never had it before!” He was tickled to discover Utica greens from upstate New York. “They’re delicious!” he said. “Spinach, escarole, put some bacon in there—it’s really good!”

When he's working a shift, McHugh is commonly the Squad's backup chauffeur. The activity level for the day varies. "It could be 20 runs or one," he noted. "It depends on the day. Fourth of July? Lots! Christmas Eve? Fewer. Halloween? Yeah, you're gonna do runs! Park Slope can be quiet, but Bay Ridge can be busy."

He continued, "Park Slope is generally quiet. People go to sleep and that's it. Where

you've got Soho or Greenwich Village, it's two in the morning, and people are out." (Squad 1 reinforces some parts of lower Manhattan.) He added, "More runs, too much to drink and [someone] fell, a fire, etc. The hotter the weather, the more people that are out, the busier you are!"



James McHugh and his son John

If he's working a shift starting at 9 a.m., McHugh tends to get in an hour or so early, and may relieve a colleague who worked overnight. Shifts may run over, but, he explains, "We're not supposed to do more than 24 hours." If there's a fire near the firehouse, Squad 1 is the fire engine, handles a hose, and douses the flame. If they're called to Coney Island, he elaborated, they're a "squad company," filling in as a ladder company, possibly using hand tools. "We go in where the chief needs us to go," he said.

SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Squad 1 is a “special operations” firehouse composed entirely of firefighters who transfer in with a minimum of five years of experience. Members have more training and know how to work with hazardous materials, weapons of mass destruction, high-angle rope rescue, trench rescue, rescue from collapsed structures, etc. McHugh once worked as an emergency medical technician on an ambulance, which put him on a special track for the firefighter’s test that he was eager to take. He started at Engine 236 in East New York before he joined Squad 1 in 2019.

Squad 1’s engine supplements ambulances that “get dragged all over the city,” McHugh said. Fire engine companies are more localized, and have training to stabilize someone who is hurt, and then pass them to an ambulance arriving afterwards. Tasking former EMTs to engines is “good allocation of resources,” McHugh said. “Amputated limb? I’ve already done that. So you’re getting bang for your buck.”



James McHugh talking to co-firefighters on his day off

With their “special ops” training, Squad 1 firefighters get called to do “a lot of other strange things,” McHugh said. Their expert abilities at handling metal-cutting machinery may result in being summoned to a hospital because an accident victim with a swelling hand needs a ring cut off. More gruesome are impalements—which again require specialized use of metal-cutters that hospitals don’t keep in-house, but that members of Squad 1 know how to wield.

THE “SPECIAL OPERATIONS” CAPABILITIES OF SQUAD 1 IS PART OF THE REASON THE FIREHOUSE SUFFERED SUCH HEAVY LOSSES DURING THE WORLD TRADE CENTER ATTACK ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001.

McHugh has developed his own professional specialties. He enjoys teaching a ropes course, drawing firefighters from other companies to learn how they would angle in to approach a problem at a construction site, a high-rise with someone hanging off or at a collapsed building. “God forbid, a 9/11 or Oklahoma City, where you have devastation over a huge area,” he remarked. “You can’t just walk over that 70-foot rubble; you have to build a rope line.”

9/11 AND BEYOND

The “special operations” capabilities of Squad 1 is part of the reason the firehouse suffered such heavy losses during the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001. In addition, the initial call came in around the 9 a.m. change of tours. The squad has only five firefighters per tour, but 12 were killed. “A lot of people were going home, and a lot were coming in,” McHugh said. Some who weren’t scheduled for the day left from home, anyway. “We lost more people than we had.”

The last firefighter who was at Squad 1 on 9/11 retired two years ago. The Sitka spruce sculpture of three firefighters raising the American flag, carved by chainsaw artist Nyal Thomas, Jr., and stationed for years in front of the Coop, has been moved inside due to weather damage. It remains a daily reminder, though “like everything else you become somewhat numb to it,” McHugh said. “You walk past every day, and you remember the names. We pass stories down, and we try to keep it as alive as we can.”

WELL OVER A DECADE AGO, A FIREFIGHTER GLIMPSED A UNION STREET NEIGHBOR HARVESTING HONEY FROM HIVES. MCHUGH HAS BECOME A BEEKEEPER FIREFIGHTER, ALONG WITH A COUPLE OF SQUAD 1 COMRADES.

There’s a special firehouse culture around retirement, McHugh said. “It’s a very funny organization with some things. It’s the only place where you pay for your retirement

party and give a gift to the firehouse. You get a promotion—you give a promotion gift,” he said. Squad 1 has been fortunate on the foodie gift-giving front: “Somebody got promoted and gave us a grill!”



Outside the firehouse

And if the grilled dinner is to be honey-glazed, the harvest may come from Squad 1's rooftop! Well over a decade ago, a firefighter glimpsed a Union Street neighbor harvesting honey from hives on an adjoining building. McHugh has become a beekeeper firefighter, along with a couple of Squad 1 comrades. He's picked up neighborhood tips, read books, and learned from YouTube videos—and now he even keeps a hive at home.

Squad 1 harvests honey a couple times a year, he said. "It's actually pretty cool when you have a change in temperature, and you see a change in the color of the honey."

He hasn't experienced much trouble with stings from the bees, he said. "They're all very easygoing."