Honey Sensory Analysis in the U.S.

by: Stan Holt, PhD

She was right, you could see the barn from the road. As we followed directions given to us by our host, Marina Marchese, I didn't know that we would be arriving at an urban bee farm in Connecticut. Marina is the founder of the American Honey Tasting Society (AHTS), a member of the Italian National Register of Experts in the Sensory Analysis of Honey, and co-author (along with Kim Flottum) of the book, The Honey Connoisseur. She hosted the first United States-based training using the curriculum sanctioned by the Italian National Register of Experts in the Sensory Analysis of Honey that Suzy Spencer, Terry Wilson and I had the chance to take in July.

The barn is a two-story structure. The first floor is where she sells honey (including 22 unifloral varietals) and bee equipment. The second floor is devoted to training. Eighteen of us, including folks from Australia, the Dominican Republic, and Canada, had the opportunity to meet and study with our host, Marina, and Gian Luigi Marcazzan.

Gian Luigi came from Italy to teach the Introduction to Honey Sensory Analysis, which is the same curriculum they use in Italy. Gian Luigi is the leader of the Honey Sensory group within the International Honey Commission, the leading organization to develop methods for honey quality evaluation. He is the President of the Italian Register of Experts in the Sensory Analysis of Honey with more than 25 years of experience as a teacher and professional honey taster.

Sean Collinsworth recently wrote about his experiences in Italy in the *Winter 2018 Bee Buzz*; it was the first time the curriculum was taught in English. The three of us had a very similar experience to Sean here in the United States. We learned about the differences between taste and flavor, profiled 18 different unifloral honeys from Italy, and began to identify unifloral honeys through our senses. We discussed the importance of *terroir*. One of the fun activities was a pairing of honey with cheeses. It was amazing what happened to blue cheese when you dipped it in buckwheat honey.

All three of us marveled at what the Italians do to certify unifloral honeys. In addition to sensory analysis, they do a microscopic analysis and a physio-chemical analysis. In the microscopic analysis they look at pollen sources, reminding us that the pollen source is not the same thing as the nectar source for honey. In the physio-chemical analysis they look very closely at moisture content and subsequent crystallization, and the types of sugars that are in the honey.

We started profiling some of our own US honeys from five samples Marina had collected. We tasted and discussed Buckwheat, Orange-Citrus, Sourwood, Goldenrod and Buckwheat. Hints of cinnamon can be found in Clover honey. There was a slight hint of anise in the Sourwood. The strength of Buckwheat was something we all remarked about. There are so many words for the diverse sensations, aromas and tastes, so it became a challenge to find more words than "sweet" to describe honey.

We walked away wondering what would motivate a group of us to begin to build profiles of US honeys. The Italians do this to prevent fraud and to promote the marketing of artisanal honeys. Recent EU regulations also require labeling to be accurate. Would it benefit us to do this in the US? We also wondered about what might take place here in North Carolina as more of us become trained in sensory analysis.

For more information on the next class coming up in October of 2019 in the US visit: https://tinyurl.com/honeytasting101

If you would like to attend the classes in Italy you can click on this link: https://tinyurl.com/honeycourseitaly

Finally, you can find tasting resources on the North Carolina State Beekeepers Association Honey Tasting page (https://tinyurl.com/NCSBAhoneytasting)

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Photo: Courtesy Stan Holt

Stan Holt, Terry Wilson, Gian Luigi Marcazzan and Suzy Spencer