

Mad about Red Honey! – by Dr Jeune Guishard-Pine



Kennedy 'Natural' Hazel, Senior beekeeper, St Kitts Beekeepers Co-operative (SKBC)1

'Mad Honey' is a thick, "red-golden" honey that has little resemblance to the familiar honey that can be found on supermarket shelves. It is produced principally in the mountains of Nepal and Turkey and areas close to the Black Sea, where the honey bees feed on rhododendron flowers. It has further been described as "*a psychedelic liquid*"² which can give you a 'high'. Therein lies the name of 'mad honey'.



'Mad Honey' – a hallucinogenic Red Honey²

Research has found that the rhododendron flowers contain a psychoactive chemical called '*grayanotoxin*' that enters the honey without being biochemically modified in any way and this is why the effects are so potent. In Nepal in particular, rhododendron flowers are placed close to the hives to encourage the honey bees to forage on the flowers because they believe that their 'mad honey' have health benefits and they use it to treat conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and a variety of conditions of the stomach. They also believe that it can improve male sexual performance, showing the same effects as the commercial drug *Viagra*.²

On the riskier side, research has also found that if you take more than the recommended dosage, you may suffer from '*Mad Honey Poisoning*' which carries symptoms of nausea, numbness, low blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, manic

hallucinations, seizures and blurred vision - it might kill if more than one teaspoon is ingested!²

In the Caribbean, the 'red honey' that is produced is a much kinder form! The red honey that is produced in the Caribbean, is thought to have been created by honey bees foraging on the popular hibiscus and sorrel (*hibiscus sabdariffa*) plants^{3,4}. It is also known from its African roots as the *roselle*.⁵ The honey produced is a red colour similar to the deep red, fleshy flowers of this plant.



A field of sorrel plants in St Kitts⁶



The glossy outer flowers of the *hibiscus sabdariffa*⁷

Scientific interest has grown into the health benefits of the hibiscus plant as the regular consumption of the concentrate has been linked to stabilising cholesterol and blood pressure.⁷ Research done with Hibiscus concentrate found that it is high in antioxidants and offers many other benefits. In particular, it may help promote weight loss, reduce the growth of bacteria and cancer cells, and support the health of the heart and liver.⁸ Due to its polyphenols, it may fight off a range of infections from pneumonias to UTIs, as well as even prevent cancer.⁷ However, more research is required using diverse human populations.



The deep red, fleshy flowers of the Sorrel plant⁹, farmed by SKBC President Monroe Tweed¹⁰

Sorrel is the word that we use to name both the plant and the drink that is made usually during the festive Xmas season. The natural taste of sorrel is similar to cranberries and therefore has quite a sharp and tart flavour. We would usually add sugar to taste when preparing it as a drink. However, red honey is likely to give all the benefits of sorrel without the drawbacks of processed and refined white sugar.

The potential market for red honey from the Caribbean requires further investigation. One company in Boston, Massachusetts, USA run by Ivy Lawson,

has been selling hibiscus and sorrel honey since the female owner first sampled it in Jamaica:

*"I was not a lover of honey. The honey from Jamaica changed my mind."*¹¹



Iveyes now operates an online store supplying hibiscus and sorrel honey and other products¹¹

In St Kitts, senior beekeeper Kennedy Hazel has recently begun farming sorrel. Unsurprisingly, his crop also produced raw red honey. Sorrel is a favourite drink in St Kitts and Nevis and has year-round demand but is not in abundant supply. The SKBC have been discussing increasing the supply of raw red honey by planting and farming more sorrel. From early market research it is likely to create quite a buzz.....



Raw Red Honey and golden honey both produced in St Kitts supplied by Kennedy Hazel¹²



Labels for honey supplied by the SKBC¹³

References

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12. Photos courtesy of the author
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