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## Honey creates buzz for Jewish new year

By Adeena Sussman  
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I'd been there only half an hour, and I was already intoxicated. But this was no alcohol-induced high. I was standing in a gorgeous, ceramic-tiled kitchen in dangerously close proximity to a bunch of fat rosemary sprigs bathing in a pool of warm honey. The scent of the sweet, herb-infused elixir was so mesmerizing that I nearly picked the saucepan up off the stove top and started drinking. Carol Saal stopped me just in time. ``I made that using last year's," she said, referring to the honey her son, Nate, had bottled in late summer 2005.

The Saal clan has a modest way of making everything culinary look like a breeze. Someone had just finished frying eggplant rounds in olive oil the Saals bottle from their own trees. A chilled bottle of the house wine, whose production is overseen by Carol's husband, Harry, stood sweating on the counter. Let's not forget the house-cured olives -- both kinds of them. And -- oh, yeah -- they're in the midst of a multi-year authentic balsamic vinegar production project in collaboration with several other families and former Oliveto chef Paul Bertolli.

But I was there for the honey.

### Annual event

Every year sometime in the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year celebration that begins this year on Friday night, Nate invites friends to his family's Sonoma vacation home for an all-hands-on-deck weekend of wildflower honey extraction and bottling, cooking and honey-themed eating co-hosted with his wife, Susan.

Jews traditionally cook with honey for Rosh Hashana, and drizzle it on apples and challah bread, to symbolize their hopes for a sweet and successful year to come.

I'd been hearing about the honey party for years, so when an invitation arrived for Labor Day weekend and I knew I'd be in town, I couldn't wait to take part in the proceedings.

I found Nate in the villa's other kitchen with his friends Galit and Sam Rosen, standing amid multiple ice cream machines loudly churning an orange-honey ice cream whose recipe had been cribbed from the Ben & Jerry's cookbook. ``I hope it hardens in time for dinner," Galit said.

As more guests -- an assortment of Nate and Susan's high school, college and grad school friends, plus a scattering of others -- began showing up, Nate and Sam headed down to the barn to sterilize the honey extraction equipment.

Nate, 34, and a co-founder of Palo Alto tech start-up GloopLabs, has been keeping bees ever since he discovered a wild hive near his family's Palo Alto home about 20 years ago.

Then in 1995 Harry and Carol built Villa Reti, an idyllic facsimile of a gracious Tuscan countryside home, nestled in the hills of Sonoma. Nate's beehives were transported to the property, where he could increase production and share his sweet good fortune with a larger group of friends and family.

Soon, Nate was back to help us suit up in white cloth jumpsuits, net-covered safari hats and long canvas gloves. ``I've actually never been stung by a bee before," someone said as Susan sealed our ankles, wrists and neck with a thick swath of masking tape to prevent the errant bee from finding a way in.

``I got stung four times last week removing a wild hive from a friend's house," Nate said. He's just trying to scare us, I thought. Silence hung in the air for a brief second, until we caught a glance of ourselves in a window and laughed. We looked like a cult of space-age gardeners.

Just down the hill past the fenced-in vegetable garden, four whitewashed sets of square pinewood drawers stood locked behind a fence. ``Don't stand in front of the beeline," warned Nate, motioning to the area directly in front of the hives. Apparently, this upsets the bees, as does bumping into the hive.

Under the blazing late-summer sun, we filled a small canister with leaves and lit it, producing smoke, which elicited a horror movie-worthy buzz of alarmingly increasing volume. The bees began to flee from the upper tiers of each hive (the two lower compartments house the queen, larvae and pollen).

One by one, Nate removed the rectangular wooden frames from the upper portions of each hive. All the frames were covered with swarming bees, though only some were weighted down with honey. He brushed the bees aside with a gloved hand, then had us gently transport the precious cargo to an empty wooden box a few yards away. Only honey from the top sections was removed, leaving ample sustenance for the bees during the wintertime, when the local flowers stop blooming and the bees take a break from collecting any nectar.

Susan helped us untape ourselves and remove our jumpsuits. The honey was driven to the barn. After a demonstration from Nate, we took turns ``uncapping" the wax seal from each honey frame with a heated implement that resembled a cross between an offset spatula and a spackling knife. Working carefully, we shaved away the wax coating, a sensation akin to slicing through chilled butter with a hot knife.

The smells of honey and hot wax mingled in the air. ``It reminds me of getting my legs waxed," my friend Amy Klein quipped.

Any remaining wax was picked out by hand with a metal-tined comb. The honey frames were then fitted into a giant kettle-like mechanical extractor, which shook like an overloaded washing machine when cranked up to full velocity. The centrifugal force spirited the viscous,



amber-colored honey from the frames and sent it flying against the internal walls of the stainless steel drum, where it clung before oozing down in the direction of the spigot.

Nate coaxed every precious drop of this year's relatively light harvest downward with an oversize spatula, and the honey was caught in a plastic tub. One more filtering through a fine-meshed sieve, and the honey was ready to be siphoned into jars and decorated with golden labels designed by Megan Frost, who creates a new sticker for the jars every year.

## Honey-coated recipes

Twenty-three precious bottles of honey later, we headed back to Villa Reti to start preparations for dinner. As I climbed the stairs to the house, I found guests Ajay Sreekanth and Sanjay Wagle plucking fresh lavender for Ajay to incorporate into a honey-sweetened cocktail called -- what else? -- the Bees' Knees.

We snacked on crisp, salty-sweet corn fritters Sanjay and I had just made under Carol's direction, as Harry uncorked bottles of his off-dry Villa Reti Moscato Seco. "Reti" which means "network" in Italian, seems to be the perfect name for the house. Besides being a reference to the Saals' vast network of friends, family and business associates, it's a reference to Network General, the Silicon Valley company Harry founded in 1986 and which went public three years later. "We call this the house that networks built," he said with a wink.

Outside, Nate's annual international honey tasting had begun. Of the 15 varieties displayed, the medicinal, pine-tinged propylus bee glue honey from Cuba was voted most interesting, if not the tastiest. The favorites were a sugary, feather-light Hawaiian white honey and the nutty, citrus-tinged Villa Reti 2003.

## Salmon and, yep, honey

The sun had now set over the Valley of the Moon. We sat down to eat on the terrace just as wild salmon, caught a few months earlier by Nate and Harry on an Alaskan fishing expedition, was coming off the grill. Carol gave the center-cut fillets one last brush of a rosemary honey-balsamic vinegar glaze, arranging the crisp-skinned fish on a giant ceramic platter. We helped ourselves to a honey- and red wine vinaigrette-dressed salad, fried eggplant rounds cloaked in a lemony honey-sesame glaze, and olive oil-roasted parsnips and carrots. Bottles of rich, fruity Williams Selyem 1996 Russian Hill pinot noir lined the long tables. For dessert, a homemade rustic apple tart came to the table with that honey-laced ice cream. Galit shouldn't have worried. Like everything else about the weekend, it was perfect.

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