

# Learning the Language of Honey

By Anne Pike, Somerset BKA

*You, like Anne Pike, will have savoured the sweetness and aroma of honey, but attendance at a recent course in Italy run by honey sommeliers revealed an entirely different level of appreciation. By sharpening the sensitivity of her senses Anne found she could detect flavour profiles of honeys that she could not have imagined possible.*

Ask a beekeeper what their favourite honey is and the answer is likely to shoot back: "My own!" For the honey that is the embodiment of our local terroir is the one we have nurtured, alongside the bees, and is the most familiar and, arguably, the most delicious. But how to put into words the glorious scent of fresh honey when we remove a roof during a flow, or the taste of those first golden drops straight from the honeycomb?

Fortunately, there is an international honey language to describe its properties from visual appearance through to odour, taste, aroma and texture which is taught on an English-language honey tasting course held twice yearly in Bologna, Italy. Run by instructors who are members of the Italian National Register of Experts in Honey Sensory Analysis, the course I attended last summer attracted beekeepers, chefs, journalists and honey entrepreneurs from all over the world. After five intense days learning how to sniff, look, taste and describe, now my vocabulary runs to a full gamut of terms to describe sensory characteristics such as 'warm and lactic', 'aromatic and resinous', and 'chemical and medicine'.

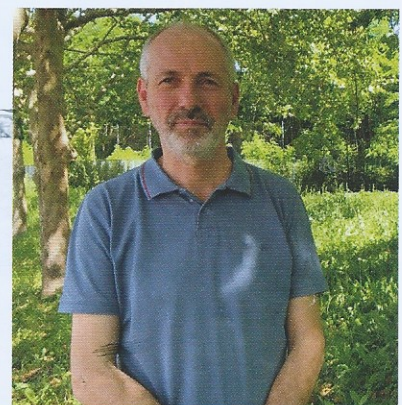
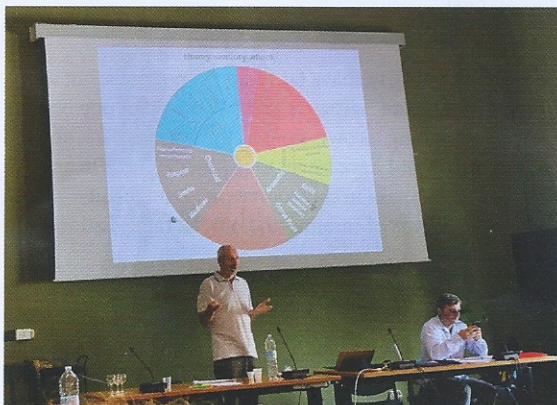
## Steering the senses

One of the guides to unravelling the alchemy of honey was Gian Luigi Marcazzan, President of the Italian Register of Experts in the

Sensory Analysis of Honey and technical manager at the Council for Agricultural Research and Economics (CREA) in Bologna. He outlined the aims of the course as follows: "Today we are not very used to using our senses so the course teaches you to use your senses and after that recognise different types of honeys based on their sensory characteristics."

In class this meant sniffing a balloon glass containing an unnamed sample to start piecing together clues to discover its identity. Incidentally, the glasses are kept at room temperature and are covered so that the aroma is enhanced when unwrapped. Then it is time to taste: a plastic spoon (never metal as it affects the taste) is dipped into the sample to evaluate texture and flavour (tip: pinch the nose to intensify the taste). It is not necessary to have super-senses to be a good honey taster, although lots of practise is required.

Gian Luigi explained that: "The aim of this course is to recognise exactly the differences which make each honey unique. You have to describe and recognise these properties and this is very important especially when beekeepers put a name of the honey on the label because if we declare a honey sample is, for example, acacia it must have specific sensory characteristics. So, it's not just to describe it with the sensations you perceive, but also to recognise the sensory characteristics."



Above left to right: Gian Luigi Marcazzan (standing) and Raffaele Dall'Olio introduce the class to the honey tasting wheel; Raffaele Dall'Olio tasting honey from Somerset; Gian Luigi Marcazzan enjoying some sunshine.



Balloon glasses sealed with cling film contain Italian monofloral honeys ready for testing.

### So much more than sweet stuff

Fellow instructor, Raffaele Dall'Olio, is a professional honey taster, international honey judge, scientist, member of the Italian National Register of Professional Honey Tasters and beekeeper. His thoughts were that: *"It [honey] is a very complex food and bees make it in a very complex way visiting hundreds and thousands of different plants so honey is not just sweet, it has flavour that goes from sweet to bitter and from floral to animal: we have all the possible flavour tastes and aromas."*

Raffaele acknowledged that beekeepers also have a vital part to play in the final outcome: *"From the selection of the equipment, the kind of hive you choose, the kind of paint you use, the kind of wax you use in the hive, the treatment you do for the bees, the placement of the hive, the way you move the bees, the way you extract the honey, anything relating to the honey pipeline, it can be important for the final quality of the honey. Storage as well of course, but from the selection of the equipment to the extraction, everything is important."*

### Play the food pairing 'game'

Chef and nutritionist, Andrea Tibaldi, joined us on day four to create culinary magic with the pick of Bologna's gastronomic



Raffaele Dall'Olio preparing some honey samples.



Andrea Tibaldi, chef and nutritionist.

delights and a selection of Italian honeys. *"We use different strategies,"* he said. *"For example, very strong cheese like a strong blue cheese or a very aged pecorino are quite salty with a strong aroma and we can pair them with a mild honey in order to have sugar to smooth the edges of the cheese. We are not getting the aromas of the honey, but what we want in fact is only to feel the cheese in a different way and to taste the cheese mostly."*

Pairing works with all cheeses, as Andrea explained: *"We can also do the opposite; so we can use a very mild, sweet cheese that gives the richness of the milk with a strong honey. So we are producing something that is going to enhance the taste and the aromas of the honey."* He continued, with a unique perspective of food pairing: *"Food pairing in general – and cheese and honey pairing – is a game; it is beautiful to play this game and to have fun and to see what comes out."*

The seventeen Italian monofloral honeys used on the course took us on a journey around Mediterranean flora. This started with the soft sweetness of acacia and travelled through the golden yellow of fruity sunflower, and on to the pungent and bitter strawberry tree, with much else en route.

Of course, here in the UK we have far fewer monoflorals, but we do have the exquisite floral fragrance and sweet gold of polyflorals in abundance, each telling its own story of the season. Back home I have been applying what I have learnt to my own honeys in an attempt to identify the main nectar sources including fruity blackberry with its aroma of caramel and oilseed rape, distinctive for its cabbage odour.

### Future courses

Further courses on 'An Introduction to Honey Sensory Analysis' were to be held in 2020 in Bologna, but in view of the current COVID-19 outbreak if you are interested in attending any future courses please see: [https://www.cibo360.it/catalogo/prodotti/honey\\_tasting\\_course.php](https://www.cibo360.it/catalogo/prodotti/honey_tasting_course.php) for more information and updates.