

Middle East Sweet on U.S. Honey

By *Elias Pacheco Orozco*

Last summer, after the U.S. honey industry showed eight guests from the Middle East the best that U.S. bees had to offer, the traders and government officials returned home to Yemen—more knowledgeable and highly impressed.

“Many in the Middle East picture the United States as one large city and they wonder how we can possibly produce quality honey,” said Nathan Holleman, Chief Executive Officer of the National Honey Board.

“By taking our tour, these potential customers had a chance to see the green fields and honey farms of upstate New York and Pennsylvania. They also toured a couple of processing plants and a meadery and saw the care with which we make our honey and honey products.”

The National Honey Board and the Foreign Agricultural Service hosted

The mission of the National Honey Board, located in Longmont, Colo., strives to help U.S. honey producers export their products. The board and USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service targeted the Middle East as a potential growth market because of its promise over several other international markets.

In 2000, the United States exported 1,861 tons of honey to the Middle East, a slight increase over the 1,724 tons in sold 1999. That volume accounts for 36 percent of the total U.S. honey sold overseas.

Honey is an important staple in Yemen; a survey conducted by the Honey Board

found that 30 percent of the respondents eat honey every day. Moreover, 37 percent ate honey two to three times a week. In 2000, Yemen imported 488 tons of the amber fluid from the United States.

Getting a Taste of U.S. Variety

Buyers from the Middle East purchase a lot of orange-blossom honey, according to Holleman. But they are often unaware of the 300 other very different honey varieties produced in the United States.

“We want to entice them into purchasing honey from different flowers as well as honey-based products such as

honey mustard,” he said.

That dazzling variety of U.S. honey was made clear to the foreign visitors during a trek to Hackenberg Apiaries in Lewisburg, Penn., where owner David E. Hackenberg has been raising bees since 1962. The apiary has 3,000 hives.

Hackenberg’s bees do double-duty for him. Not only does he profit from their honey, but regional fruit growers also pay for pollination. So when fruit trees are in flower, Hackenberg’s busy bees go on tour, traveling on trucks across state lines to be released in orchards, bogs and fields in widespread locations.



With all those fruitgrowers demanding service, at any given time the Hackenberg farm may offer blueberry honey from Maine, cranberry honey from Massachusetts, orange-blossom honey from Florida or even apple blossom honey from Pennsylvania.

“The unique thing that U.S. honey has to offer the world is its variety,” said Hackenberg. “The United States can boast of sage honey in the West, fireweed honey from Alaska and cranberry honey here in the Northeast. In no other part of the world is there such diversity.”

After visiting the farm, the delegation traveled to Dutch Gold, the processing plant that receives Hackenberg’s product.

While at the plant, Holleman seized the opportunity to educate Middle Eastern buyers about container materials.

“We commissioned a study and found that 58 percent of the consumers in Yemen prefer glass packaging, mainly because they feel it allows them to see the honey better,” he said. “We know, however, that glass increases shipping weight and breakage losses. We realized it was important to demonstrate their honey would still be visible and of high quality when shipped in clear plastic.”

A Natural Choice for the Middle East

Typically, commercially produced U.S. honey is strained and filtered to remove wax and extraneous material, then heat-treated to kill microorganisms and delay crystallization. Sometimes, however, that is not what the customer wants.

About 65 percent of Yemeni consumers expressed a preference for raw honey. For half, the color of choice was golden honey—but slightly more than 30 percent wanted dark-colored honey instead.

“In the Middle East, they sometimes



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prefer a less-processed honey; that’s where Really Raw Honey in Baltimore, Md., has great potential,” said Holleman.

Mimi Bennett, president of Really Raw Honey, has been packaging unstrained, unheated honey since the 1980s. She sent some samples to FAS’ post in Dubai, where it drew a favorable response from buyers at the Gulf Food Show, sponsored by FAS’ Agricultural Trade Office in Dubai. In fact, many in the delegation on this honey tour asked about her product by name.

Selling and Shipping Honey

In Yemen, the import of food products is dominated by a few key traders who usually have their own cold storage facilities near the port.

A sale begins when an importer opens a letter of credit by submitting the required documents to a bank. Once the paperwork is processed, the importer waits for the honey to arrive, usually at the Port of Hodeidah.

The product is then shipped to Sanaa for distribution to wholesale markets and

retail outlets—where it becomes a sweet treat for consumers throughout the region. ■

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