

# The Traveling Beekeeper



## SO YOU WANT TO LIVE OFF THE BEES?

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*A visit with a Colorado beekeeper who left a state government position to develop his beekeeping into a full-time income.*

**M**any beekeepers dream about leaving their job and working bees enough to justify an adequate income. Many of the people who do this have a husband, wife or partner who has a good job with benefits so the beekeeper is in a position to walk away from the 'unrewarding' position at work and follow their 'passion' as a beekeeper. This is a visit with a beekeeper from

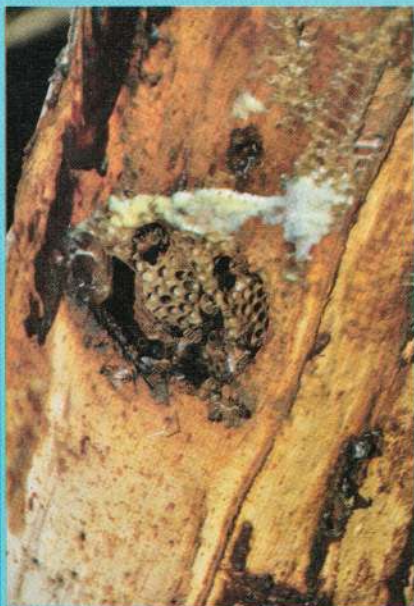
the Denver area who has done this. He is not yet where he wants to be, as are many of the readers—and is in a period of growth and transition.

Matt Kentner is a 40-something beekeeper with a wife, Cathy, who is a music teacher. They have two daughters, aged 5 and 10. They live in a Denver suburb called Lakewood on a lot that is large enough for a horse, but already has too many bees but understanding neighbors. Plus, as you will see in the photos, the city bees are pretty well screened from view. Here is my visit to Matt Kentner of Kentner Farms ([www.kentnerfarms.com](http://www.kentnerfarms.com)).

Kentner is from Minnesota and Iowa, attended chef school in Minnesota, and worked as a baker in Steamboat Springs turning out hundreds pounds of bagels every day, plus getting time to ski and enjoy the local recreational opportunities. Then, he went to work for the State of Colorado as a computer specialist. But he walked away from that, and he and his wife are growing the beekeeping busi-

ness. Early on they sat down and Cathy, the math person in the relationship, figured out how Matt could get the bees, equipment and bee truck by paying cash and not going into debt as he built up bee colonies. When I visited him he had about 75 colonies, with the goal of reaching 400. He produces primarily alfalfa honey packed into an attractive, well-designed jar and label combination that helps him earn a premium price. He recently went through the application process to sell honey through the Denver Whole Foods, a process that impressed him for the chain's passion for food quality and food safety.

My first instinct to interview Matt was when he gave me a jar of his chunk honey during two days of workshops I was doing with DenverBee.org (Denver Beekeepers Association). The jar is a 12 oz hex jar with a neatly cut chunk of honey surrounded with



One of the bee trees Kentner is moving into Langstroth equipment.



Tree cut to reveal the honey comb inside. Kentner provides a bee "relocation" service.



Tool belt with two hive tools, hammer, bee brush, spare hat and other items. Note the smoker is on a hook to keep it near working distance.





Brushing the bees off the honey frames inside the super. Kentner does not use chemicals to repel the bees.



Plastic buckets filled with honey from alfalfa flowers.



Kentner places hives on old wood pallets to keep them off the ground and out of the weeds.

brilliant honey (he uses sweet clover for this). When I figured that he was probably the most experienced beekeeper in this new group based in Denver (beekeeping was banned there until recently), and I sensed his interest in learning, I made arrangements to visit him at his Lakewood site. There he has a storage building, but has taken over a back room of the house for his extracting room which doubles for honey storage. The room is neither large nor fancy, but it has white walls and ceiling, and is clean. Buckets of honey are stacked to the ceiling for bottling as the year goes on.

It was mid-October, and the day after my first visit, I received a call from Matt from one of his bee yards about 35 miles northeast of Denver where commercial alfalfa hay irrigation circles provide the farmers with four cuttings a year. While alfalfa hay should be cut before blooming, according to the nutritionists, the growers must be permanently late, since there is enough of a nectar flow to keep the bees on a strong flow from May to early October. Matt constantly removes honey and replaces the extracted supers. He works systematically to move the honey frame by frame, brushing the majority of the bees off the frames as he removes them. He knows to keep empty drawn comb on the colonies to increase honey production by the colonies.

Because of the low humidity of the mile-high area, the honey is often only 18 percent moisture, even when still uncapped.

### Home apiary

The home apiary is tightly enclosed with a

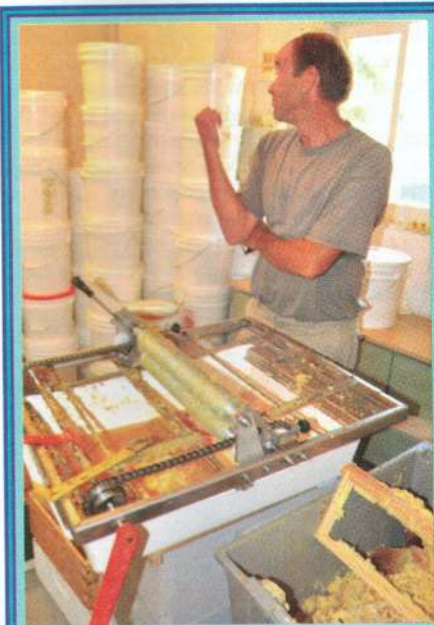


Matt uses screws to hold the hive bodies apart, and places hardware cloth at the entrance as a mouse guard.

system of shrubs and roll-up fence so bees may be brought in and removed easily. There are too many colonies in the apiary, but the neighbors are not an issue, and eventually the colonies will be put into permanent out-yard locations. There are a combination of regular hives and bee trees that need to have the bees removed.

**Honey bee relocation services** (If you have Honey bees living in your house, we can give them a happy home).

That is the phrase from Matt's website. One reason there are so many bees in the home apiary is the pressure Matt has on removals, bee tree salvage and capture of swarms. This combines the need for community service as an urban beekeeper with a way to charge a fee for cutouts and other bee removal fees. Matt and I did not discuss what he charges, but I have noticed that many cut-out services are charging about \$100 per hour for their time, with a minimum fee of \$300 to \$800 per removal, depending on the local market (and that does not seem to be determined by the affluence of the residents). These fees seem entirely fair with the amount of work and equipment required for some of these jobs.



Matt with uncapper and pointing to his filled buckets of honey.

### Honey marketing

Honey is extracted in a small room attached to the house. You go through the garage to get into the house, so there would seem to be a natural buffer to keep bees out of the main house. The room has white walls and has a simple uncapping system and extractor. Honey is stored in clean white plastic (and food grade) buckets in the same room, and is hoarded to keep local honey sales alive. Honey is sold in a small honor display at the end of the driveway. A sign directs customers to the small case containing several one-pound and several two-pound containers of honey. Matt reminded me of my opening of *Increase Essentials*, where I wrote that I had driven many miles in the Midwest and had not seen a **Honey For Sale** sign. I admitted that that has really changed with the addition of new beekeepers such as himself. The honor honey sales provide a nice income stream every month.

The hex jars Matt uses for his chunk honey are not cheap, nor are the glass jars he uses for the liquid honey, but they are part of presenting an attractive product to the public. If he is able to get into Whole Foods, he will need to increase his output considerably. The challenge will be to produce enough of his low chemical use honey, and fill the needs of the natural foods market.

A growing part of the honey sales are on the Internet using a great website ([www.kentnerfarms.com](http://www.kentnerfarms.com)) where Matt was able to use some of his computer background to full



Transferring honey frames to an empty box. Using only the bee brush, Kentner moves all of his honey one box at a time to his truck.





**Honor system holding honey for sale at the Kentner Farms driveway.**

advantage. The attractive medieval painting of a three skeps and bees flying around it is the Kentner Farms branding effort, one that links the honey, the business and the beekeeper together.

### Tricks

I always learn from beekeepers when I do a visit and I want to share a few things that I have seen before and one I had not seen until Matt showed me.

First, the hives in the out apiary are all screwed together, making them tight and less likely to pull apart. This will also make future repairs possible.

Second, Matt wears a tool belt with room for two styles of hive tools, a bee brush, a small hammer, a white hat for when the bees get peppery, and a few other items. Unlike me, he tends to put the tools back into the belt and not leave them around on the hives, although he admitted he likes the dry fall when he can find the items lost in the lush vegetation of spring and summer.

Third, Matt removes honey continuously during the season. The moisture content is low and he knows he needs to keep empty drawn comb on the hives in order to stimulate nectar gathering. He takes off the honey one box at a time, carefully removing the bees and placing the super in the truck under a bee-proof lid. With the giant irrigation circles of alfalfa, it seems likely that there are plants in bloom for his bees to reach most of the May to October season. He notices an increase of other nectar plants in the areas where he places bees, probably due to increased pollination. For biennials and perennials this has taken several years to be fully expressed.



**A combination of rolled fence and vegetation hides the hives in a suburban lot.**



**Inspecting honey outside Denver. The front range of the Rocky Mountains is in the distance.**

Compared to beekeepers who pull honey at the end of the season, Matt is stimulating his bees to gather more honey by replacing the extracted supers of drawn comb, a known foraging stimulant.

Fourth, and a new trick for me, Matt uses the bee brush to remove *bees while the combs are still in the super*. By doing this there are fewer bees in the air. Matt does not like to use chemical removal products, since he feels that they interfere with the social nature of the bees and his own social acceptability when some is on his clothing.

Fifth, Matt likes to wear shorts, a T shirt (which may be removed when the bees are agreeable), a baseball type cap, and no veil. While the veil is in the truck if the bees get peppery (and they were the day I visited), most of the season his only protection is the smoker (which he lights with a small blowtorch).

Sixth, Matt uses a hammer in two ways that I observed. First, he uses the hammer and hive tool to separate the hive bodies. There are mainly cottonwood trees in the area, and the propolis was especially effective at gluing the hive parts together. He uses the hammer to gently push the hive tool between boxes in order to get good separation.

The hammer is also at hand to nail down the plywood migratory lids he uses. Some



**Medieval print Kentner Farms uses for branding products and in publicity.**



**Matt Kentner in one of his apiaries.**

have rabbits and other lids are cut to fit the Langstroth supers. With propolis buildup he is able to use two nails on most hives, but can tack down the ones where there are gaps. This produces a tight hive.

For ventilation, the second hive body of each hive has a vent hole entrance. He winters in two deep hive bodies.

### Fifteen minutes of fame

Matt asked that I not do a story on him since he has been in the local media because of three hives he placed on the top of the Brown Palace Hotel, one of the finest in Denver and where Presidents stay. The roof-top honey is a milestone for Denver, where bees were illegal until Marygael Meister took on the battle and started Denverbee.org. You can see photos of Matt and his roof-top hives at the hotel website; [www.brownpalace.com](http://www.brownpalace.com). Click on the bumble bee logo for the story about the honeybee hive that produces honey for afternoon tea. I love the fact that few artists have had one drop of biology in their training. Let me get them into a bee yard!

### Making it work

Kentner Farms will provide a new beekeeper the equipment they need. Or you can pay for his service that provides "a full years management, honey extraction, medication/treatments and feeding. Private beekeeping lessons are available by appointment." Here are the three points Matt makes in his well designed (remember he was in computers) website:

"Customer satisfaction: if you are not 100% happy with honey, candles or anything you have purchased from us, please let us know.

Sustainability: We practice beekeeping with long-term goals in mind. This means thinking about how my children and future generations will keep bees and looking for non-chemical solutions for honey bee pests and diseases.

Local food: What can you say about this generally the closer to home the better."

I hope to keep up with Matt in the future, and report on how he is doing with all these activities.

Dr. Connor will conduct the Sixth Serious Sideliner Symposium at the Mega meeting in Galveston, Texas in early January. He will also have his book display at the meeting.