

A balmy July morning at the Union Square Farmers Market in New York City, 8am. Squeezed between stalls of ripe corn on the cob and home-made apple cider, David Graves, bee magnate and keeper of more than 20 hives, is stacking a wooden trestle table with jars of his toffee-coloured honey, each one covered with its distinctive New York City Rooftop Honey label.

Meanwhile, over in London, the photography and documentary film-making duo of Steve Benbow and his partner, Jill, are scooping up the latest batch of summer honey from their rooftop hives not far from Tower Bridge. Their aptly named London Honey sells in A Gold, a British-food-only delicatessen in Spitalfields, where its owners, Ian and Safia Thomas, cut the honeycomb directly off the frame to the anticipation of customers.

In Paris, hives have perched on the rooftop of the Palais Garnier since 1985. Olivier Darne, a young graphic artist who has kept bees for eight years, dots abstract metal hives across the city splashed with the words *butineur urban* (urban honey-gatherer) for all to see.

These are just a few examples of modern-day apiarists who are about as far removed from the romantic image of the gloved and suited cottage beekeeper as you can get. Even Sting, appropriately, produces honey from the hives he keeps at his Tuscan homestead. Further proof that beekeeping is the new buzzword.

And you don't necessarily need a Tuscan

In ancient Persia newlyweds are said to have drunk honeyed water to ensure a frisky future. Hence the word honeymoon

estate to get going. In the steamy urban setting, where bees are said to work five times harder than their rural cousins – thanks to a higher concentration of pollen-producing flowers – all you need is a flat outdoor space.

Manhattan may seem the most unlikely setting for bees but as far as David Graves is concerned it's a tropical heaven for insects. A firm believer that locally produced honey can help combat allergies such as hay fever, Graves began his search for apiary sites around the city with an advertisement at his weekly market stall. The hand-painted sign read, 'We are very gentle. We like to share our New York City honey. Do you have a rooftop?' As a result, his hives now sit in the most unlikely places; from the terrace of a swanky boutique hotel to a world-famous cathedral (names he would prefer not to reveal but ones that are probably



easy enough to guess). And when it comes to collecting the weekly crop, Graves relies on Antoine Philippe Dorcelus, his loyal Haitian cab driver, to take him from one apartment building to the next. As Graves says, it's not just about bringing honey to the masses but bringing the masses to the honey.

And the masses, it seems, are swarming to the profession – especially here in the UK. According to Glyn Davis, the president of the British Beekeepers Association, the number of new members each year has grown from around 80 on average to 500 this year, with increasing numbers of young professionals taking up this rewarding and stress-releasing pastime.

James Hamill is a beekeeper who together with his wife, Ute, owns the Hive honey shop on Northcote Road in Clapham, south London. Hamill also runs beekeeping courses

at his Surrey farm to a mix of stressed-out city slickers that includes several lawyers and more than one burnt-out executive.

'The low-vibration hum of bees can soothe frayed nerves, so bees have an incredibly calming effect on their keepers,' says Hamill, who could also be described as a botanical alchemist for the way in which he mixes diverse strains of pollen – from lime trees to clover – to produce honey with plenty of zing. Bees have been used in healing for at least 4,000 years – honey, as any naturopath will tell you, is a good natural remedy for all kinds of ailments; from burns and ulcers to a classic hangover remedy and a skin-friendly beauty treatment. It makes a great face pack and can do wonders when added neat to a hot bath.

Back inside Hamill's tiny Clapham shop, children gaze in awe at a glass-fronted wall

The honey trap

From serious honey producers to burnt-out executives, from pop stars to university professors, they're all getting a buzz from beekeeping. You'll find hives on Manhattan rooftops and in exclusive hotels. **Lucie Muir** investigates the latest must-do activity. Portraits by **Poppy de Villeneuve**

Above surrounded by pots of honey and honey bears, James Hamill at the Hive honey shop he runs with his wife, Ute, in south London. **Opposite** grouse with honey toast.

Recipes by Rose Prince. Food photographs by Lisa Linder. Food stylist: Helen Trent

Grouse with honey toast serves 2

Painted with honey during the last few moments of cooking, the first grouse of the season is served on toast, crisped in the oven, then spread with a little more of the nectar. Eat with a salad of crisp young chard leaves, rocket or mizuna.

 2 grouse, plucked and oven ready

 2 tbsp butter

 4 pinches of sea salt

 4 pinches of freshly ground black pepper

 2 slices of white or wholemeal bread

 4 tbsp honey

to serve

 2 handfuls of chard leaves

 2 tsp walnut oil

 2 tsp balsamic vinegar

Preheat the oven to 190C/375F/gas mark 5. Put the grouse in a roasting pan and insert a teaspoon of butter and some salt and pepper into the cavity. Rub some softened butter into the breast. Spread more butter on to both sides of the bread and place on a separate baking tray. Roast the grouse for 35 minutes. After 20 minutes, put the bread in the oven and bake until golden and crisp – about 10–20 minutes (it should be ready at about the same time as the grouse).

Heat the honey in a small pan. Paint the honey on to the surface of the grouse using a pastry brush and return to the oven. Cook for a further five minutes then leave in a warm place for 15 minutes – this allows juices that rushed to the surface in the short cooking time to work their way back to the centre. Carve off the breasts and twist off the legs.

To serve, dress the chard leaves with the walnut oil and balsamic vinegar and divide among two plates. Spread each piece of crisp toast with a thin layer of honey, place each on the chard leaves and balance the grouse pieces on top.

crawling with live bees. The bees drop in and out at leisure on flights to and from local gardens and parks, through a secure pipe that hugs the ceiling and leads out through a chute in the back door. The phone rings constantly and Hamill can be heard advising a customer to join a local beekeeping association before starting. It is a good idea, especially if you are to learn how to tame an angry swarm.

'If you are going to keep bees, then prepare to be stung,' says Stephen Kelly, the chairman of the Sussex Beekeepers Association. Kelly is to bees what Monty Roberts is to horses, a real-life bee whisperer, one who can calm any volatile situation. Kelly's tips for a friendly hive? 'First, never wear hairspray, bright prints or red nail varnish,' he says, 'and whatever you do, don't make any rapid eye movements. Bees don't like that at all.'

Peter Hoffman, the head chef and owner of the Savoy restaurant in Soho, New York, recalls, 'The first time I kept hives for David [Graves], it was like a scene from that 1970s movie *The Bees*. It was the

Above Vicky Conran, wife of Sir Terence, feels 'very at home' in her beekeeping outfit.

Opposite fig and almond tart with honey sauce

**Fig and almond tart with honey sauce**

serves 10

A final drenching of this summer tart with a hot honey and lemon sauce, and you have a rich and sticky pudding that equals any toffee sponge.

 240g (8oz) unsalted butter

 240g (8oz) golden caster sugar

 240g (8oz) ground almonds

 3 eggs, lightly beaten

 5 green or black figs, quartered (peeled if the skin is tough)

for the sweet pastry

 60g (2oz) icing sugar

 270g (9oz) plain flour

 135g (4½oz) softened unsalted butter

 1 large egg yolk

 1–1½ tbsp double cream

for the honey sauce

 240g (8oz) honey

 the juice of 2 lemons

 2 capfuls of mead (optional)

You can make sweet pastry using a light, cool touch with your fingers, but it is quicker and even better made in a food processor. Put the icing sugar, flour and a pinch of salt in the processor and whiz for a few seconds. Add the butter with the egg yolk and enough

cream to form a paste when the mixture is whizzed briefly. Do not overwork the paste. Remove from the processor, place on a well floured board and lightly work into a ball, then roll to about 5mm (¼in) thick. The pastry will be very soft. Lift it by wrapping it around the rolling pin, then use to line a 28cm (11in) tart tin. Don't worry if it tears; just patch it with spare pieces of pastry. Chill for half an hour.

Preheat the oven to 200C/400F/gas mark 6. Prick the base of the pastry randomly with a fork, cover with greaseproof paper and fill with dry rice or beans to prevent bubbling up. Bake for about 15–20 minutes, until the edges are crisp and the base dry. You may want to lift away the paper and beans for the last five minutes of cooking so the base can dry out.

Remove the pastry case from the oven and leave to cool. Meanwhile, make the frangipane. Melt the butter and sugar together over a low heat, stirring with a spoon or whisk, then cook for 2–3 minutes, until the mixture has a golden fudge consistency.

Remove from the heat, add the ground almonds and the beaten eggs and stir until well combined. Turn the oven down to 190C/375F/gas mark 5. Pour the almond mixture into the case, then drop the fig quarters on to it evenly spaced. Bake for 15–20 minutes, until the frangipane is just firm and slightly puffed. Warm the honey with the lemon and mead and pour over the tart as you serve.

hottest day of 2001 and the hives went into complete meltdown, which left a very angry swarm heading towards my neighbour's apartment.' Luckily, that didn't deter Hoffman – whose autumn menu lists sheep milk panacotta drizzled with home-grown honey – from adding two hives of his own to those he already kept for Graves. 'I am constantly amazed watching these fascinating creatures at work,' he says.

Hoffman's amazement is shared by the book reviewer John Carey, a former Professor of English Literature at Oxford University. Carey, who describes himself as an amateur beekeeper, has kept bees in the garden of his country home in Shipton-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire, for the past 22 years. Not content with keeping his bees in one place, he likes to pack them (and their hives) into his car and drive in search of heather and rape seed. Once an interesting field or hedgerow is found, he lets his bees out to roam. 'When I let them out into a new environment, they go completely crazy – it's as if they have discovered a Butlins holiday camp,' says Carey, whose home-grown honey sells in the local village shop.

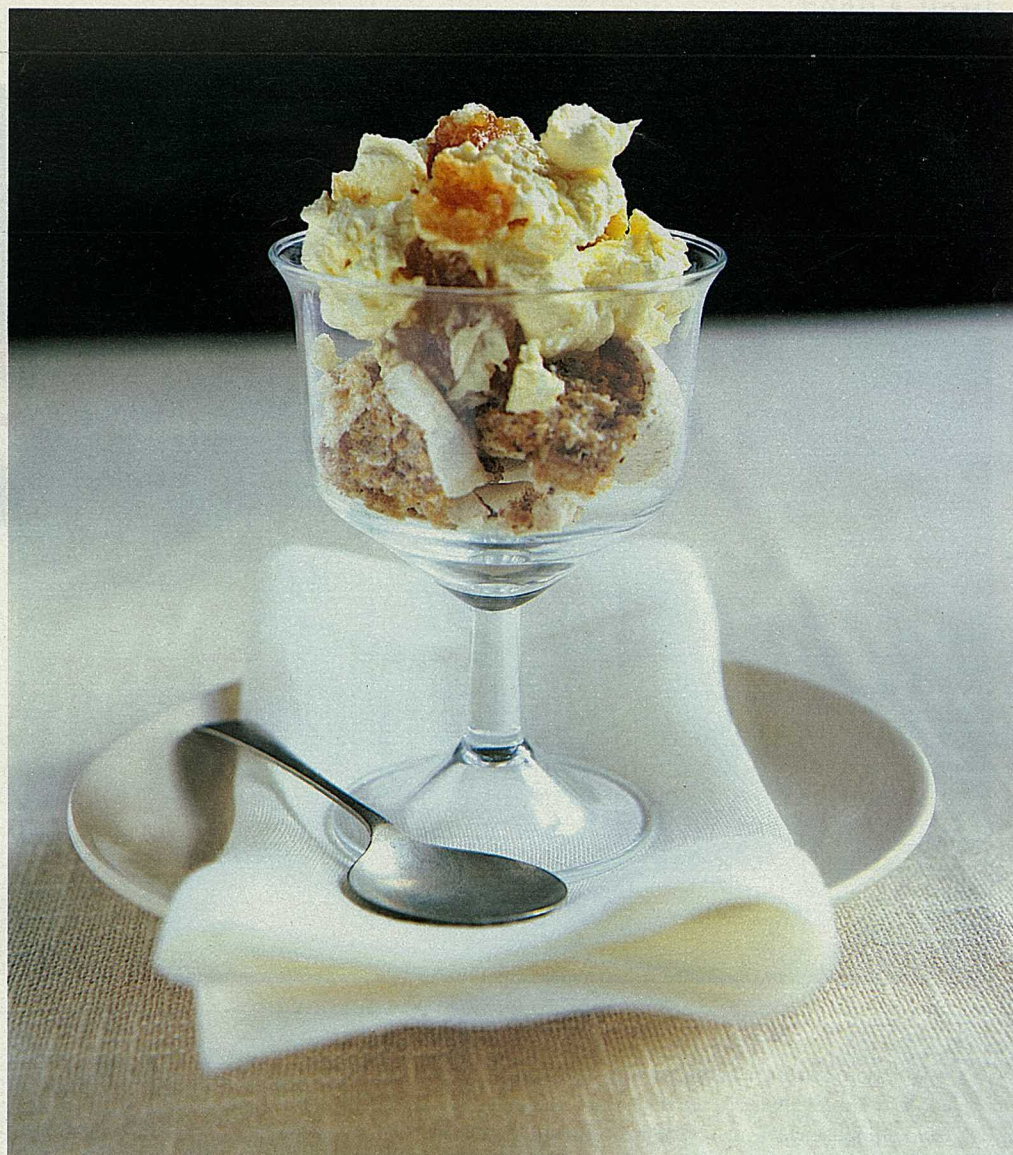
Then there are those who are simply smitten with a romantic vision of beekeeping: the cute little wooden hives, the pristine white suits and the net-covered hats. Vicky Conran is the first to admit she has been hooked. She now owns two white-painted, slatted-wood hives in the classic William Broughton Carr design, which her husband Sir Terence gave her as a birthday

'When I let my bees out into a new environment, they go completely crazy. It's as if they have discovered a holiday camp'

present a year ago. As she flits around the kitchen of the family home near Newbury, Berkshire, Conran seems less bothered about the actual honey than she is about the aesthetic. The latest beekeeping equipment brochure is more exciting to her than a copy of *Vogue*. 'Just look at these amazing labels,' she says pointing enthusiastically to a page filled with brightly coloured graphics that border on the kitsch.

Seeing her now, dressed in her white beekeeping suit and duck-egg blue-coloured gloves, you can't help but think how incredibly stylish she looks. 'I feel very at home in this outfit,' Conran says. So much so that she sometimes forgets to take it off. 'Once I was shopping in the local Waitrose and when I got to the checkout I glanced down to find that below my very smart designer top I still had my beekeeping trousers and boots on. I think I caused quite a stir.'

One woman who certainly knows her honey is Hattie Ellis, the author of *Sweetness and Light: The Mysterious History of the Honey Bee*. We meet in Tom's deli in Lewes, East Sussex, where Ellis arrives carrying a tray of honey that she has collected from around the world for me to sample. In between spoons of gooey mango honey from New Zealand and hot peppermint tea we discuss honey trivia – about which Ellis knows a lot. For instance, did you know that in Africa, hunters from the Gabon tribe fell vast trees with a tiny axe to get the honey from a bees' nest? That honey is the only sweet thing they ever taste? Or that the



early Greeks minted coins with bees on them and that the honey bee can travel once around the world on just one ounce of honey juice?

And let us not forget honey's aphrodisiac qualities. Some say that, back in ancient Persia, newlyweds celebrated the start of their married life by guzzling glasses of honey mixed with water every day for a month to ensure a fabulously frisky future together – hence the term honeymoon. We clink teacups and toast the mysterious honey bee. ■

Above honeycomb cream with hazelnut meringue. **Below** Vicky Conran's slatted-wood hives were a birthday present



Honeycomb cream with hazelnut meringue

serves 6

Whipped cream, chunks of honeycomb and nutty meringue. Serve in glasses or a pretty glass bowl.

2 egg whites

120g (4oz) golden icing sugar, sifted

90g (3oz) chopped hazelnuts

400ml (14fl oz) double cream

120g (4oz) cut honeycomb

Preheat the oven to 150C/300F/gas mark 2 and line two baking sheets with baking parchment.

Put the egg whites and icing sugar in a large bowl and beat with an electric whisk until stiff peaks of white foam are formed. This will take about nine minutes, so a tabletop food mixer is best, although you can use a handheld mixer.

Fold the nuts into the meringue. Drop small dessertspoonfuls of the mixture on to the baking parchment, 5cm/2in apart. You should fit approximately nine on each sheet.

Bake for 30 minutes until very pale brown and slightly cracked. Allow the meringues to cool on the trays then lift them off the baking parchment.

Whip the cream, cut the honeycomb into rough chunks and fold together roughly. Serve spooned over the meringue.