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Cover photography: Zoë Lemargan



# Bee Kind, Bee Ethical.

Honey is literally the perfect food: it is 100% natural, deliciously sweet and it never goes off - no wonder Winnie the Pooh is obsessed. And it is not just honey that is amazing – there are the clever bees that work so hard to make it.

Kelly Lees and partner Anna Scobie are the founders of Newcastle's *Urban Hum*. Their mission in life is to spread the word about the awesome nature of the product they work with, and the magic and complexity of life inside a honey beehive.

*Words: Laura Jackel • Photography: Zoë Lonergan*



Strangely enough, *Urban Hum* started out due to a lack of backyard zucchinis.

“We have always had a veggie patch and yet we couldn’t work out why our zucchini plant wouldn’t grow anything. We took a course in beekeeping to understand more about pollination, then acquired ourselves a beehive. One hive became two and then six,” former teacher, chef and now full-time apiarist Kelly says.

“In 2013 we decided to produce our own honey to sell at local markets. Anna has a background in visual arts and so she set up the branding and administrative side of the business while I began working with the bees.”

Kelly and Anna now manage a collection of one hundred and thirty hives across twenty six suburbs in backyards around Newcastle – and the numbers keep growing.

“People are starting to take a greater interest in where food comes from. Our customers want to support local and eat organic, and you can’t get much better than eating natural honey from the hive in your backyard!

**Strangely enough, *Urban Hum* started out due to a lack of backyard zucchinis. “We have always had a veggie patch and yet we couldn’t work out why our zucchini plant wouldn’t grow anything.”**

A bit like wine or coffee production, some of our honey is blended while the rest is ‘single hive origin’. We can tell you exactly when and where that individual jar was sourced from.”

While they have hives in almost every suburb in Newcastle, Kelly admits that certain locations produce more honey than others.

“The suburbs with well-established gardens do really well. Mayfield, Cardiff and New Lambton/Lambton are the most abundant.





Some suburbs even produce honey with a distinctive flavour. Islington honey has a prominent astringent or lemony taste perhaps due to the abundance of paperbark trees, where as our Cardiff hives produce honey with privet overtones.”

Aside from picking out suburb-specific flavours, Kelly notes that the differing tastes of Newcastle’s honey is more related to seasonal flowerings and the bees’ choice.

“There can be two hives in the same garden and yet the honey from each can taste differently. My background as a chef has helped me to spot nuances in flavour.”

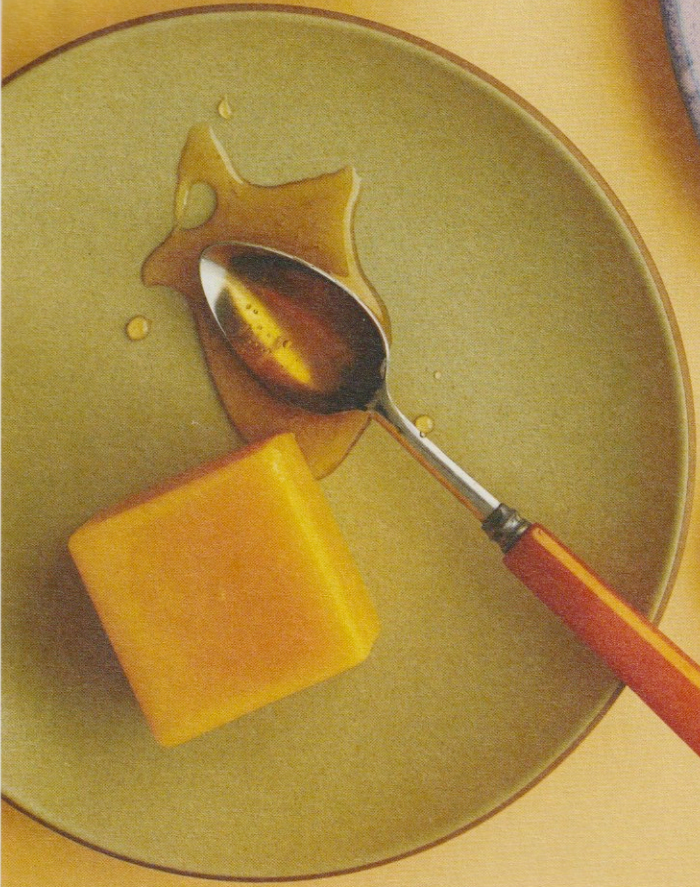
Newcastle honeybees are incredibly productive and Kelly extracts up to one hundred kilograms of honey from just one of *Urban Hum*’s hives over twelve months.

“I visit each of our hives about five to ten times every year to extract honey. The honey is then placed into a stainless-steel drum and spun by hand. We strain it into buckets for twenty four hours and then it’s placed into jars.”

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While commercial honey is micro-filtered, *Urban Hum* honey is raw and coarse-filtered meaning it contains most of the pollen. When it gets cold, the pollen turns the runny honey to solid ‘candied’ honey that is still perfectly delicious to eat on your toast.

“Not only is the natural pollen tasty, it has great health benefits for hay fever sufferers. I recommend eating honey from your neighbourhood, as it contains small amounts of local pollen that help to inoculate against hay fever symptoms come springtime.”



Kelly is not only passionate about the all-round goodness of honey but about the thousands of bees she works with to make her living.

"We are first and foremost ethical beekeepers. We want to be kind to the bees in the ways we work with them. For example, I will only ever remove honey during the middle of the day in winter so the hive stays warm.

"I also leave plenty of honey for the bees to eat and as they are especially sensitive to bad moods, I would never tend a hive if I wasn't feeling great.

Because of this need to be one hundred per cent present when working with the hives, I find beekeeping is a very meditative practice."

Each Urban Hum hive contains up to eighty thousand bees, but hive hosts will only ever see a few. Most of the bees are either out in the suburb foraging or working inside the hive.

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Each bee has a designated and important role to play within the colony. There are cleaner, forager, guardian and of course Queen bees. They communicate through an intricate system of vibration, touch, scent and even dance!

"You can probably tell that I love bees and think they are highly complex creatures. They can distinguish one hundred and sixty different floral chemicals in scent whereas the fruit fly can only manage forty."

The perfection that is *Urban Hum's* delicious honey, is made even more perfect when Kelly explains how they also utilise the by-product, beeswax, to create an array of natural goods.

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"We make lip balm, surfboard wax, furniture polish and insect repellent for sale online and in selected stores around Australia. Our insect repellent is proving so popular it will soon be exported to Singapore."

If the thousands of bees didn't keep Kelly and Anna busy enough, the arrival of daughter Nancy in 2018 has given them much joy and a possible apiarist in the making!

"Nancy is only fifteen months old but already she really likes the bees," Anna says. "She looks at them closely with her little arms behind her back and then tries to pick them up!"

Educating their daughter, as well as the wider community about the decline in bee numbers and their vital contribution to our environment, is important to both Anna and Kelly.

"We run one day beekeeping courses from our teaching apiary site in Mayfield, as well as two hour hive tours for those that might not want to become bee keepers, but just want to find out more about bees," Kelly says.

"We are also starting to give more school and community group tours and talks. This is the perfect way to raise awareness of the amazing work that bees do to the next generation and beyond." 🐝

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