

SWEET AS SUGAR

Up until the 16th century, honey was the most important sweetener in Europe: a situation that only changed with the advent of sugar cane as an economic heavyweight from the plantations of North America. The use of honey in cooking, however, goes back to the beginning of time, or at least to the beginning of people keeping records about what they ate.

The first traces of honey as an important food date back to 7000 BC. A Neolithic rock painting in the Araña cave at Bicorp near Valencia depicts a man collecting wild honey from a tree. The oldest written reference to honey is believed to be Egyptian, dating back to about 5.500 BC, when Lower Egypt was also known as Bee Land. However, fossils of honey bees have been discovered that date back some 150 million years. In short, few foods are older.

Bees are creatures of habit and will travel up to two miles in search of nectar, returning to the same type of plant again and again. Before re-entering their **hive** after a nectar-collecting mission they dance a little **wiggle** at the entrance, their stingers pointed in the direction of their nectar **stash**: the greater the wiggle the better the stash of nectar and the better their chances of making excellent honey.

Honey is the substance that is formed after the nectar collected by the bees from the blossoms of trees and plants is deposited into the waxy honeycomb. Evaporation of water makes it thick and viscous. And of all foods, including wine, it is perhaps the substance that best expresses where it comes from, fully reflecting the taste and smell of herbs and flowers.

Perhaps the most surprising fact of all is that without honey we'd be missing about one third of all the food we eat. Plants provide the bees with food. In return, the bees carry cross-fertilising pollen from one plant to the next. Without one there would be none of the other. Not only would we have less of the green stuff, but there would be less to feed **livestock** and, eventually, humans too. The worrying thing about this is that beekeeping is a dying tradition with fewer and fewer people entering the world of apiculture.

Lucky for us then that Spain remains an important centre of beekeeping with productions today ranging from the most primitive to the most advanced in the world. There are roughly 2.5 million hives in Spain, about 70 per cent of which are taken care of by professional apiarists (beekeepers). These produce about 300,000 metric tonnes of honey a year, much of which is exported to Germany, the UK and France. The most common type is *milflores* (a thousand flowers), a blend that tends to be sweet and mild.

A report in the September 2005 issue of *Health and Age* confirmed that including honey in your diet can increase your **intake** of antioxidants but, up until now, the real health benefits of honey have not been proved. Nevertheless, it has earned itself a reputation as a healthy sweetener despite being higher in calories than sugar.

Costa Brava Resident (November 2005). Adapted

hive: rusc, eixam / colmena, enjambre

wiggle: moviment bellugadís / meneo rápido

stash: acumulació, provisió / acumulación, provisión

livestock: bestiar, ramaderia / ganado, ganadería

intake: presa, consum / toma, consumo

Part 1: Reading comprehension

Choose the correct answer. Only ONE answer is possible.

[0.5 points each correct answer. Wrong answers will be penalized by deducting 0.16 points. There is no penalty for unanswered questions.]

1. Sugar cane was
 - a)** grown in Lower Egypt a long time ago.
 - b)** not known in Europe until the 16th century.
 - c)** the only sweetener in North America until the 16th century.
 - d)** planted for cooking since the beginning of time.
2. A rock painting shows that
 - a)** honey was collected from trees nine thousand years ago.
 - b)** there were fossils of honey bees.
 - c)** honey is supposed to be the oldest food ever.
 - d)** the oldest written records were kept in ancient Egypt.
3. Bees dance at the entrance of their hives to
 - a)** celebrate the success of their nectar-collecting flight.
 - b)** help make a better supply of nectar.
 - c)** encourage their friends on their nectar-collecting missions.
 - d)** brighten up the working life of other honey-making bees.
4. Honey and wine are substances that
 - a)** need the evaporation of thick water to offer their best flavour.
 - b)** reflect the original taste of the plants they come from.
 - c)** need the nectar collected by bees from the blossoms of trees.
 - d)** blend well with the smell of herbs.
5. A most surprising fact is that without honey
 - a)** there would be less green stuff to feed animals and humans.
 - b)** people would decrease their consumption of fast food by one third.
 - c)** plants would not stop providing bees with food.
 - d)** bees would carry more pollen from one plant to the next.
6. According to the text, the problem is that
 - a)** apiculture is dying as a tradition of feeding livestock.
 - b)** the number of people working in apiculture is decreasing.
 - c)** most professional beekeepers work in Spain.
 - d)** without apiculture there would be fewer humans in the world.
7. Most of the honey produced in Spain
 - a)** comes from a primitive plant named milflores.
 - b)** is exported to other countries for further manufacture.
 - c)** comes from hives looked after by professional beekeepers.
 - d)** is eaten by Spanish consumers.
8. It has not been confirmed that by including honey in your diet
 - a)** you will live a much healthier and longer life.
 - b)** your intake of antioxidants and calories will increase.
 - c)** your intake of sugar will be much healthier.
 - d)** your health problems will be solved.