

HONEY IN THE COMB – A TRUE DELICACY

Ann W. Harman
Flint Hill, VA

The judging criteria for round or square sections and for cut-comb honey have many similarities. Also the criteria for comb honey figures in the criteria for chunk honey.

Square sections are difficult for the bees. They really do not like squares. The bees definitely prefer the round sections. Cut comb requires a light touch and a sharp knife. Chunk honey is officially described as a piece of comb surrounded by the same type of liquid honey. Chunk honey is not how many pieces of scrap comb can you toss in a jar then fill with whatever honey you have.

Beekeepers must realize that bees have “dirty” feet. Hives do not have doormats. Bees stomp around in pollen and walk across sticky propolis. These two things get tracked all around the hive. As far as the bees are concerned pollen and propolis are part of life. As far as the customer is concerned comb honey can look “dirty.” You, the beekeeper, are accustomed to both pollen and propolis so now you need to look at them from the customer’s perspective. And that is what the judging criteria is all about.

Cleanliness is an important criterion. The beekeeper must make every effort to remove comb honey as soon as capped to prevent the “travel stain” from pollen and propolis. These will be seen on the wooden frame of square sections, on the plastic rim of rounds, and on the surface of all comb. Unfortunately some parts of the country have dark propolis and brilliantly-colored pollen. The judge is looking for the absolute minimum of “travel stain.” The customer can then appreciate the beauty of comb honey.

Uncapped cells are usually found around the edges of square and round sections. Some leniency is given with square sections because the bees seldom fill those wooden boxes out to the edges. The bees do much better with round sections. The judge is looking for a minimum of empty cells. Remember – empty cells don’t have honey.

The customer is looking for a neat appearance and the same color throughout. Comb that has some light and some dark honey is going to look a bit weird to a customer. Customers don’t buy “weird.” They do buy uniformity. And they do not want to see a plug of pollen. To a beekeeper this just means a disorganized bee. To the customer it means something “weird.”

Honey that has crystallized in the comb can be unpleasant to eat. Customers that are used to the liquid coming out of the cells as they spread comb honey on a hot biscuit will not be pleased to find comb honey as hard as a rock. Large crystals just make for crunch instead of smooth.

Just exactly what are watery cappings and why are judges looking for these? Well, this criterion has probably been with us for over a century. At one time it was thought that the cappings were wet. They are, but with honey, not water. Some bees fill up the cells nice and full then put on the cap. The honey touches the underside of the cap. Other bees leave a bit of an air gap between the honey and the cap. The cappings therefore appear whitish and opaque. The reality is that there is nothing wrong with either way of filling and capping. It is just that the whitish caps look nice. So this criterion comes down to appearance, nothing else. But beekeepers are reluctant to change so choose a queen and some bees who leave that little air gap.

The best-looking sections are those that are filled out well. This means that the total weight of the entry is high. If more than one section is an entry then they should all be as uniform in weight and appearance as possible. If a customer sees the same weight claimed on labels and if some sections are well filled and others seem not, then the customer could wonder about short weight.

In chunk honey the piece of comb should be thick and fill the jar from side to side and from top to bottom with being crushed. Jars with short pieces floating a couple of inches above the bottom

do not give a good impression. The customer is looking for a nice combination of a piece of honeycomb and some liquid honey. A generous piece of comb gives the desired effect.

Both chunk honey and cut-comb require that the piece of comb be cut and handled. Crushing the edges either with the knife or your fingers leads to pieces of wax and a general ragged appearance. With cut-comb, draining the piece leads to a better-looking package. The comb is not sitting in a pool of honey. The criteria for neatness of cut, and in the case of cut-comb, the absence of liquid honey, and the absence of wax flakes all have to do with appearance. And, after all, appearance does sell honey.

Producing nice comb honey is a challenge. Meeting the judging criteria makes you aware of both beekeeping techniques and packaging.