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If it's American honey, it's likely not organic

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When it comes to sizing up the purity of the honey you buy, you're pretty much on your own.

You may be paying more for honey labeled "certified organic" or feel reassured by the "USDA Grade A" seal, but the truth is, there are few federal standards for honey, no government certification and no consequences for making false claims.

For American-made honey, the "organic" boast, experts say, is highly suspect. Beekeepers may be doing their part, but honeybees have a foraging range of several miles, exposing them to pesticides, fertilizers and pollutants on their way back to the hive.

And while they're required to put the country of origin on the label--a fact that could help guide wary consumers--some honey producers don't bother.

The head of one major honey company advises caution and warns that in the United States there's confusion over label terminology and inconsistent enforcement of labeling laws.

"There is honey out there that is illegally and purposely mislabeled, an adulterated product that is very difficult to stop," said Dwight Stoller, chief executive of Kansas-based Golden Heritage Foods. "There's probably not a lot, but it's still a real issue and consumers must be aware of that."

Unless a shopper buys honey from a farmers market, where they can talk to the person who raised the bees and bottled the honey, they're relying on what's printed on the label.

Major supermarkets offer dozens of different brands, sizes, types and flavors of honey for sale. Consumers might walk away with the finest-tasting, highest-quality honey there is. Or they could end up with an unlabeled blend, adulterated with impossible-to-detect cheap sweeteners or illegal antibiotics.

Part of this is because of the government's failure to define what true honey is, but the blame also goes to a handful of sleazy honey packers who buy and sell cut-rate foreign honey, which usually has little problem slipping past overstretched customs inspectors.

The Seattle P-I surveyed 60 honey products commonly sold in the Pacific Northwest and found glowing praises of healthfulness, sincere promises of quality and an endless selection of advertising adjectives touting honey as the true elixir.

"100% Pure." "U.S. Grade A Pure." "U.S. Grade 1." "America's Best Honey." "U.S. Choice." "Natural and Pure."

The list goes on and on, but it's mostly hype, experts say.

"If somebody puts 'U.S. Grade A' on there, who's going to say it isn't?" said Harriet Behar, outreach coordinator with the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service. "There's no enforcement, so people can say whatever they want."

The government takes a minor role in the grading of honey. It's left entirely up to the industry.

Stoller was the only one willing to discuss it openly. His company, with beekeeping roots going back 90 years, is one of the nation's largest suppliers of honey to retail outlets, the food-processing industry and food service and restaurant-supply companies.

The government, he said, doesn't have the resources to set and enforce needed standards. And that leads to inaccurate or misleading labeling.

"Some packers just slap on whatever they feel like," he said. "Whatever they believe will attract the shopper to their product."

Where things really get sticky is the selling of "organic" honey--sold in some form by every major chain.

Government, academic and industry experts insist that U.S. organic honey is a myth. With rare exceptions, this country is too developed and uses too many agricultural and industrial chemicals to allow for the production of organic honey.

"Like other foods from free-roaming, wild creatures, it is difficult--and in some places impossible--to assure that honey bees have not come in contact with prohibited substances, like pesticides," said Chuck Benbrook, chief scientist for the Organic Center, a national advocacy group for the research and promotion of organic food.

Recent U.S. Department of Agriculture research, he said, shows that the average hive contains traces of five or more pesticide residues.

Arthur Harvey of the International Association of Organic Inspectors, who doubles as a Maine beekeeper, said two factors must be considered when attempting to produce organic honey: what the beekeeper puts into the hive, such as chemicals or medication of any kind; and the location of the hive.

Can the bee fly to a place that can be a source of potential contamination?

Harvey shares the concerns of many that there are no real USDA standards for organic honey.

"What USDA has said is that you can certify any product as organic as long as you comply with existing regulation, but there are no regulations for honey," he said. "That means the green USDA organic sticker on honey is meaningless."

Across the globe, there are 30 different, wide-ranging certification standards for organic honey, but there's no way for inspectors to detect fraud, Harvey said. The USDA, he said, has never levied a fine for a violation of organic rules--for honey or any other product.

The Naturally Preferred honey brand, widely distributed by the Kroger supermarket chain, has a USDA seal on the front label. On the back, it boasts, "Certified Organic by the Washington State Department of Agriculture."

Not so, say state officials.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture doesn't certify honey "because we have no standards for organic honey," said agency spokesman Mike Louisell.

"It shouldn't have WSDA on its label," he said, "because we don't do it."

Jerry Hayes, chief of the apiary section for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, said there are no organic standards for honey in the United States because honeybees forage in a 2 to 2 1/2-mile radius of their colonies.

"They're flying dust mops and will pick up unbelievable amounts of environmental contaminants," Hayes said.

Unlike most states, Florida has 15 full-time inspectors, a lab and other resources dedicated to ensuring honey quality, and the state is poised to do what the federal government hasn't--pass a law defining what honey is.

Consumers stand to benefit, said Dr. Marion Aller, who heads Florida's food safety division.

"This will make enforcement of food safety easier," he said.

Aller said the honey industry supports the move because it's increasingly concerned that products touted as "pure" actually may be cut with other sugars or syrups.

Washington has no apiculture inspectors, largely because there isn't the budget for it.

Claudia Coles, food safety manager for the Agriculture Department, said her staff inspects Washington's honey producers for sanitary practices only, as it does with 1,700 other licensed food

processors statewide.

"But the quality analysis of honey - determining what's really in the bottle - isn't something we have funding for," she said. "We struggle first with issues of E. coli, pathogens that make people sick with acute illnesses."

Some U.S. producers say they're confident offering certain foreign organic honeys to the public.

Mike Ingalls, president of Pure Foods Inc. in Sultan, recently stood beside a stack of brown steel drums in his warehouse. It's all marked "Organic Honey" and "Product of Argentina" - and each drum carries a sticker with a tracking number.

"I can use that number to track the honey back to the supplier in Argentina and the specific beehives in latitude and longitude and degrees, minutes and seconds," he said, "so I can plot precisely where those hives were, and that they were at least six miles away from any cultivated crop."

While Canada also produces some authentic organic honey, Ingalls said that product is currently in short supply so he's had to turn to South American imports.

As for the domestic variety, he added: "We don't produce any organic honey in the United States."

The industry hopes Florida's proposed honey standard is adopted by other states and the USDA.

If so, it may provide law enforcement the tools it needs to stop the flood of adulterated honey products.

Honey brokers and scientists say that not only is Chinese honey being laundered in other countries to avoid stiff U.S. tariffs and inspections, but also it's being sold as "malt sweetener," "blended syrup" and "rice syrup."

Florida's inspectors say some honey exported from China and India is put through an ultra-filtration process that is meant to remove contaminants. Honey is heavily diluted with water, then repeatedly boiled and filtered until it returns to a more natural consistency. Those who have tested and tasted the filtered brew said the process can completely remove all traces of contaminants, "including the color."

But there's a downside.

"In the process of taking out the chemicals, they also take out all the good qualities of the honey. What the consumer is left with is a very low-quality, sweet product--but certainly not honey," said Mark Brady, president of the American Honey Producers Association.

"If it is cheap and packers can use it to blend into other dark, cheap honey to make it lighter in color and taste a tad better, the ignorant general consumer is none the wiser. Caveat emptor," he warned.

A warning consumers should be getting, but often don't, is a disclosure of where their honey came from.

Federal law requires that the country of origin be printed on food labels, but many companies offer no clue.

Nondisclosing companies range from small producers, such as Haggen Honey, distributed from Bellingham, Wash., and Anna's Honey, distributed by Seattle Gourmet Foods, to national distributors such as Target and Wal-Mart.

A Target spokeswoman wouldn't disclose where the discount retailer's honey came from. But she said the Market Pantry Grade A honey "meets all USDA and FDA inspection standards."

Linda Brown Blakley, a Wal-Mart senior spokesperson, said it's her "understanding" that "if the honey is produced domestically, country of origin need not be included on the label."

However, USDA says honey is considered a "perishable agricultural commodity" and country of origin is required.

The label on Heins Organic Trail Honey, packaged by Pure Foods, errs on the side of overdisclosure, listing five countries of origin: U.S., Canada, China, Argentina and Australia. Ingalls, however, said that, too, isn't exactly right: He no longer imports from China and is just using up old labels.

Besides its certified organic claims, Kroger's Naturally Preferred honey also carries the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

That puzzles honey experts such as Behar.

"I don't know how Good Housekeeping can do this. They don't know anything about honey standards," she said.

Good Housekeeping--a magazine owned by Hearst, the P-I's parent company--confirmed that, in 2005, Naturally Preferred honey qualified for the seal, a status that expired last month.

A magazine spokesperson said food products considered for the seal of approval are evaluated for nutritional value based on "federal, standard guidelines."

The USDA, however, said it doesn't have such standards for honey.

Consumer advocates warn shoppers not to put too much stock in seals of approval--or even claims that the supermarket product with "honey" in the name actually contains any.

Pringles' Honey Buttered Wheat Stix, for example, doesn't list honey among its 30-plus ingredients.

A company representative said the snack is made in Thailand and contains artificial honey flavoring, not real honey. "We call it 'honey butter' because that's what it tastes like," she said.

Honey Graham Crackers do contain honey--it's on the ingredient list after sugar and high-fructose corn syrup. Ditto for Nabisco's Honey Maid Grahams and 16 other brands of "honey" crackers, snacks and cereals the P-I inspected.

Paul van Westendorp, the provincial apiculturist for British Columbia's Ministry of Agriculture, said that in Canada, there are renewed calls to tighten the regulations of honey labeling.

"The erosion of the label 'honey' has been going on for decades and beekeepers have often been frustrated by the big food processors such as General Mills, Kellogg's and many others for using honey in their product-line advertising while the product contains little or no honey," he said.

"Is the consumer getting cheated? That depends entirely on what the label says. The difference, of course, is that this type of product is typically sold to the . . . uninformed consumer."

That practice is commonplace, said Diane Dunaway, who has studied honey marketing and is editor of Bee-scene magazine, produced for Canadian beekeepers in British Columbia and elsewhere.

"It's come down to consumers taking the time to read the ingredients list on the product label versus the marketing text," she said.

"The folks who make Pringles aren't the first to exploit the health-inspiring word 'honey' for profit. Companies like these and other food processors are relying on the dumbing down of consumer awareness," Dunaway said.

As warm and cuddly as the honeybee is to Madison Avenue, she warned food processors to tread carefully.

"Hell hath no fury like a soccer mom scorned!"

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