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Russian Honey Producers Abuzz Over Fall in Production

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With honey production down, consumers should beware of fake products.

Consumers visiting the annual honey market sponsored by the Russian National Union of Beekeepers at the Kolomenskoye Estate Museum in southern Moscow this fall should expect to pay more for the sticky stuff, as the amount of honey produced in the country this year is predicted to be just over half as much as in 2014.

"Last year, 105,000 tons of honey were produced in Russia, but in 2015, we expect 60,000 tons," said Arnold Butov, head of the Russian National Union of Beekeepers.

The fall in volume is in part due to early summer's unseasonably cold temperatures, which were followed by a heat wave in July.

Viktor Volodin, 71, who lives in the village of Bobrovka in the Oryol region of western Russia and has 20 hives of around 70,000 bees each, said that his production dropped sharply this

year.

"Because of the rains and then sudden heat in the summer, the period when my 120 hectares (almost 300 acres) of buckwheat was in bloom was shortened and the bees didn't get enough," Volodin said. "This year, one hive produced 20 liters of honey, while last year it was 45 liters," Volodin said.

The Honey Economy

Volodin doesn't have a stand at the annual market, but a few times a year he sells 40 liters of honey to the Moscow farm-to-table cooperative shop LavkaLavka. The deal is far from a steady source of income, however.

"Sometimes LavkaLavka sells it all in a month, sometimes in three months," Volodin said. "I don't expect any profit. I do it because I love bees and nature."

It costs Volodin about 100 rubles ($1.50) to produce 1 liter of honey. It sells for 298 rubles for a 300 milliliter jar at LavkaLavka, and for 300 rubles per liter at his local market in Oryol.

Vladimir Plotnikov, a beekeeper in the Tambov region who has 120 hives, said that the cost of coming to the market in Moscow is just not affordable for small producers. "They told me it cost 300,000 rubles ($4,476) for a stand at one of Moscow's fairs. I couldn't afford it, since I'd also need 300,000 ($4,476) extra for transportation and for living expenses in Moscow during the two months of the fair," Plotnikov said.

But if he can't sell his honey in Moscow, Plotnikov can't sell all the honey his bees produce. Since 2013, he has gotten rid of 30 hives annually.

The Union of Beekeepers' Butov says that beekeepers need new ways to make money from their hives, but Russian legislation makes it difficult.

"Russia needs regulations similar to the United States, where a beekeeper gets money from farmers for every beehive located near their farm, as bees help to improve the flora around them," Butov said.

Grigory Kondratets, who cares for 90 hives in the village of Petrishevo south of Moscow, said that he has asked his local administration to rent him four acres of a local forest for his bees to pollinate, but was refused.

"The Naro-Fominsk administration even fined me last year 6,000 rubles ($89) for installing my beehives illegally," Kondratets said. "I complained to the Russian National Union of Beekeepers, wrote letters to the administration, but nothing helped."

Beekeepers in Siberia's Altai territory have looked to even more novel ways to earn more money from their honey. Members of the local cooperative Altai-Land of Honey offer "honey tourism" packages that give visitors the opportunity to sleep near beehives or get honey spa treatments.

Real and Fake Altai Honey

Yury Boguslavsky, chairman of Altai-Land of Honey, said that the honey from his region is particularly prized. "Altai honey is unique, with 1,000 healthy chemical compounds, compared to just 300 in other types of honey," he said.

More than 20,000 beekeepers live in Altai, which is extremely biodiverse and incorporates several climate zones: taiga, deciduous forest, steppe and mountains.

Boguslavsky says that because honey from the region is so prized, Altai beekeepers have to constantly fight against "fake" honey labeled as products from Altai.

"To prevent fakes, this year we registered the brand Altaisky Myod (Altai Honey) and any product with this name must meet the standards in lab tests that we conduct," Boguslavsky said.

The Union of Beekeepers' Butov says that the best way to avoid fake honey is to buy from a beekeeper and check the honey's "passport," which contains all the information about its origins and makeup.

"In some regions of Russia, the amount of fake honey is up to 70 percent," Butov said. "Fake honey is made of sugar, starch or syrups."

Currently the Union of Beekeepers has 330,000 members across the country, but according to Butov, the number of Russians engaged in keeping bees is on the decline and the situation is not likely to change any time soon.

"[Former Moscow Mayor] Yury Luzhkov, a devoted beekeeper, used to popularize the honey industry. He organized markets to keep the prices down and promoted honey production on TV", Butov said. "After Luzhkov resigned, the honey industry went silent and there is no sign it will be that popular again."

The honey market runs through Oct. 18 at Kolomenskoye Estate Museum, 39 Prospekt Andropova. Metro Kolomenskoye. 499-782- 8917. The market is open every day from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

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