

## FOOD METRES, NOT MILES – SWEET!

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I never expected to find myself standing on a restaurant roof in the heart of the Melbourne CBD surrounded by skyscrapers, swathed in an ‘astronaut suit’, aka personal sauna, trying to think calm thoughts as swarms of bees encircled me. But when I agreed to meet Vanessa Kwiatkowski and Mat Lumalasi, founders of Melbourne City Rooftop Honey (MCRH), at the cool Trunk Restaurant and Bar that’s exactly what happened.

Trunk is home to two hives, part of an extended family of MCRH hives now to be found at 35 locations around the city of Melbourne. Most are at restaurants or hotels, usually on the roof – hence Rooftop Honey - while some are hosted by individual bee enthusiasts who live near the CBD. And with over two hundred hopefuls currently on the waiting list, there is a real buzz around this exciting new enterprise.

The business got off the ground 18 months ago after an ‘ah ha moment’. Vanessa sat up in bed one morning and said to Mat: ‘We need to get bees back into the city and educate people about them’.

The couple had recently been to the Saturday market at the Collingwood Children’s Farm, where they spent an enjoyable morning admiring and tasting the luscious produce. It was only afterwards that they reflected on the fact that the cheese had been from Milawa, the pork from the Otways and the blueberries from Gippsland, and that there was not a single offering from inner-city Melbourne.

Some months prior to the farm visit Vanessa and Mat had begun ‘extending the passion we felt for each other to bees’. They had joined a bee club and started attending

courses for apiarists. As they had managed to establish hives in their own suburban garden with relative ease, it was perhaps inevitable that honey struck them as the perfect inner-city ‘crop’.

It was only later, when Vanessa did some research, that they realised they were joining a long tradition of urban honey producers, whose descendents can now be found all around the world in cities including Paris, London, Toronto, San Francisco and New York.

Like so many other honey producers, Mat and Vanessa are strongly motivated by concern about the global bee crisis and are determined to do something about it. They see Australia - so far free of Varroa mites which have decimated hives elsewhere - as the ‘last bee Eden’. And they want to keep it that way. As Mat puts it: ‘The world turns grey when the bees disappear. They bring colour. The more they pollinate the more the plants put out flowers.’ So far the couple have rescued and rehabilitated 35 swarms of honey bees that would otherwise have died.

There are many ways in which Mat and Vanessa’s business has a flavour all its own. One of these is the clever way they have set it up to maximise win-win opportunities.

The restaurants get to use a proportion of the honey produced on their premises. This truly local product – measurable in food metres rather than food miles - is a real selling point with customers who are increasingly health and environmentally conscious and savvy about food. Mat and Vanessa are responsible for the establishment and care of the hives so there is no drain on the restaurant’s resources. No wonder they have found the response from businesses to their project ‘overwhelmingly positive and amazing’.

The couple also take a proportion of the honey for sale via their on-line shop and the restaurants act as distribution points from which MCRH customers can collect their honey. This reduces the transportation costs for the producers.

Matt and Vanessa both have IT backgrounds, which is obvious when you visit <http://www.rooftophoney.com.au> their highly navigable and attractive web-site. Vanessa is particularly adept at using social media to promote the business and to raise public awareness of the bees' plight. One recent dry and windy day she tweeted about the need for people to put water out for the bees. 'It was so endearing to see the response from the community,' she said.

The couple are on a mission to educate people about bees wherever they can. Recently, when they were working on the hives at one of 'their' restaurants, the chef asked if he could join them. They were as thrilled as he was when he managed to 'cap' one of the frames himself.

Evidence of their success as educators is such that, rather than destroying bees, some councils now call MCRH when they encounter a swarm. And, a somewhat unlikely convert - a commercial pest controller who has dubbed himself 'the bee wrangler'- now contacts MCRH when he is asked to get rid of bees.

Although great teachers themselves, Mat and Vanessa are in no doubt that the highest laurels as educators should go to the bees themselves.

Vanessa puts it this way: 'It is almost meditative to work with a hive. You have to be calm and move slowly, otherwise the bees will pick it up. And we always have to remember – we are stewards of the bees; we tend to them'. Mat adds: 'We have had to re-

evaluate our wants and needs and we live simply now. But we are so happy doing what we are doing that we are not worried about finances. The bees have taught us so much.'

One delightful way the couple pass on the knowledge gleaned from the bees is via honey tastings, where participants are frequently amazed at the utterly different tastes and variety of honeys produced within mere kilometres of each other.

I was very lucky because Vanessa and Mat had set up a tasting at Trunk just for me, and I got to try over a dozen different flavours. They taught me how to smell test the aroma first and then savour the honey, very much like a wine tasting. Although I was initially intoxicated by the 'decidedly decadent' flavour of the Northcote Spring 2011 variety, it was the full-on pungent Bourke street CBD Summer 2012 that eventually got my vote.