

ULSTER

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COMPLIMENTARY

THOROUGHBREDS
AND INMATES: A
WIN-WIN SOLUTION

A PEEK INSIDE A
GORE STORE IN
KINGSTON

The Tao of beekeeping

How a New Paltz apiary nurtures nature



Imagine a world where young working women gather precious objects every waking hour of the day from as far as they can travel. The cargo is placed in neatly organized compartments and the women are given as many storage units as they need to contain the goods. Once the season is over and profits tallied, the workers are lined up and shot. Sound like an Orwellian holocaust?

No, it's modern commercial beekeeping. Rather than surrender 90 pounds of honey so bees can survive over the winter, commercial apiaries kill off the bees each fall, take all of the honey and buy new colonies in the spring - cost effective, but unsustainable.

That's the world where beekeeper Chris Harp entered 26 years ago. He has worked diligently for decades to understand and cultivate bees in a holistic way.

This month he and partner Grai St. Clair Rice celebrate 10 years of operating Honey Bee Lives apiary on Plains Road in New Paltz. The bee yard of three dozen hives is set in a forest clearing surrounded by banks of wildflowers. Harp, known as "The Bee Doctor," also tends a few flagging hives of bewildered beekeepers losing their bees to disease or pesticides. He feeds the colonies a sweet herbal tea designed to strengthen their immune systems before the challenges of winter.

Autumn is harvest season for most farmers. Instead of spinning out frames of honey for human use, Harp and Rice evaluate the health of their hives and share extra honey with weaker hives to keep them going until

spring.

"September is national honey month, but it's actually tricky to harvest honey in September," Rice said. "We err on the side of leaving honey for the bees and harvesting in the spring. If a hurricane like Irene comes through and wipes everything out, the bees will still have something to live on."

Rice's journey with beekeeping began more than a decade ago after the unceremonious end of her career as a producer for CNN in New York City.

"At my community garden in the city there

were two bee hives on the roof and a grumbly old beekeeper who didn't talk to anyone. But I took solace in being in the garden with the bees. When I got fired, I was like a Fresh Air kid coming up to the country to visit friends and escape the city. My friends said we should do something on beekeeping for the Farm Channel. So I used my unemployment checks to hire a second camera person and get wireless microphones," Rice said.

It was during this shoot in New Paltz that she met Harp, a tall, quiet man who skipped the protective gloves and veils and seemed to instinctively know how to work cooperatively with the bees, in contrast to her friend from Pine Bush who was swathed in sting-proof gear and book knowledge. She wanted to do a piece about the philosophy of beekeeping and knew she needed to learn more. Beekeeping was illegal in New York City from 1999 to 2010 and the rooftop grump was not going to help her.

"I thought I'd help Chris for a little while and then ended up helping him for a long time," Rice said. She still lives in the city and maintains hives there and spends concentrated blocks of time upstate at Honey Bee Lives. Her first year of beekeeping was spent getting used to 40,000 stinging insects without freaking out and learning to shift her energy from anxiety to respect so she could keep working.





"I find it mesmerizing to watch the bees in flight," says Grai St. Clair Rice.

Chris Harp and Grai St. Clair Rice of Honey Bee Lives will teach several classes this fall and winter at Deyo Hall on Huguenot Street in New Paltz. Some observational classes will also be offered at the apiary at 133 Plains Road in New Paltz. Classes include "Introduction Lecture on Bees and Beekeeping," "Gardening for Honeybees," "Intro to Organic Beekeeping: Planning a New Hive for Spring," "Understanding and Caring for Your Bees," "How to Inspect and Maintain a Healthy Hive" and "Fall and Winter Prep Hive Maintenance." Rice also has classes scheduled this winter at The Commons on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn for urban beekeepers.

For full schedule and to sign up, call 255-6113 or go to honeybeelives.org.





"The next year I was trying to figure out sounds. I loved getting to the point of listening to the hive to understand what the different sounds meant. It's using all your senses and intent to nurture nature. There's always something new," Rice said.

For his part, Harp's early beekeeping experience was fairly traditional for the first 10 years until a seismic shift transformed his experience.

"It was suggested to me that I take a class with Gunther Hauk of the Pfeiffer Center for Biodynamic Agriculture in Spring Valley," Harp said. "I'd also just finished reading William Longgood's book 'The Queen Must Die,' which I recommend to all my students." Through his studies with Hauk over many years and his own observation, Harp ratcheted up his understanding of these complex colonies. A relationship of responsive, chemical-free stewardship helped his hives flourish in health at a time of global colony collapse.

"The way it's done is to be able to read the bees. Each hive is its own individual nation with its own personality. Never the same tactics in management," Harp said. Pointing to the hives in his yard, he elaborates. "This one over here throws all of her pollen and nectar downstairs for the nursemaids to go down to. That one over there puts it left and right, second frame in. Everybody runs their shop differently and has their own work modes. They're all workshops that operate differently but the end product is the same. A great part is understanding that and being able to read each one as an individual nation, which is what they are."

Harp limits the substances he exposes the hives to, choosing herbal teas over antibiotics and fungicides, wax and wood frames over plastic. "I use substances that do not contaminate the hive, honey or wax or impair the bee," Harp said.

Hauk, who was head of the apiaries at Pfeiffer for 20 years, asked Harp to take over when he retired in 2006 to start the Spikenard Honeybee Sanctuary in Virginia. Harp and Rice developed the Honey Bee Lives curriculum of multiple seasonal classes, which are now offered at Deyo Hall on Huguenot Street



Chris Harp holds one of the slats from inside the hive while searching for the queen.

in New Paltz.

"I find it mesmerizing to watch the bees in flight," Rice said as bees zipped out of multiple hives with a mission-bound force on a midsummer day at Honey Bee Lives. It's at the end of winter at her small satellite apiary in New York City when the mysteries of bee sensitivity are most evident. "When you're in an urban environment with rubble around

and they leave this spot and go up into the sky, you don't know where they are going, but they come back with pollen and nectar and you go 'Wow!' No matter whether you're urban, suburban or rural, it changes your sense of your surroundings. It enlivens your understanding of your own property, visually and energetically."

The bees also tried to give Rice advance

- 1) Being able to "read" the bees is critical, says Chris Harp. "Each hive is its own individual nation with its own personality."
- 2) A honey bee returns to the hive.
- 3) Harp limits the substances he exposes the hives to. "I use substances that do not contaminate the hive, honey or wax or impair the bee."



(ABOVE) Harp marks the queen with a blue paint pen for easy identification later.

(RIGHT) The sign at the entrance of the bee apiary at 133 Plains Road.





"If you observe your hive instead of reading books about them, you can learn to read the bees. You understand more, but there's still always another mystery."





A rooster at the
bee apiary.

warning of an illness.

"Bees see ultraviolet light and they sense fear like dogs do. A number of years ago I was out in the apiary weeding and over the course of a week or so I kept getting stung or they were bopping off of me repeatedly," Rice said. "I got so annoyed with it I said 'Screw this!' and went back to the city. Well, I came down with shingles. They knew I was sick before I knew I was sick."

Rice and Harp raise bees to promote honeybee health, not to commodify them

for honey or farm pollination services. Still, they harvest a few frames of honey every few weeks throughout the season as a way of educating students on the subtle differences based on foraging sources.

"There are thousands of flavors. Every flower is different," Harp said.

"In the beginning as beekeepers you make notes and take photographs. Everyone has an iPhone these days," Rice said. "If you observe your hive instead of reading books about them, you can learn to read the bees. You understand more, but there's still always another mystery."

Harp respects bee intelligence and how finely attuned their sensitivity is. If he sees all of the bees coming home on a blue-sky day, a storm's rolling in, even if there's no evidence yet. The bees know.

Teaching what the bees need

Rice calls their way of working with bees the *tai chi* of beekeeping.

"We work slowly and gently. Not with a hazmat suit and tons of smoke and gloves. It creates a barrier. If you go in at the right time of day, it's unlikely you'll get stung. If you smoke a hive, the volume goes up and they run around like crazy and you won't get

a sense of the rhythm of the hive. But I can pull out a frame of bees from the dark womb of the hive into bright sunlight and the queen will still be laying eggs and the workers will still be doing their waggle dance and feeding the babies and go about their business," Rice said. "I only get stung maybe three times a year, and we're dealing with millions of bees."

Teaching that philosophy of beekeeping to enthusiastic newcomers usually begins with discouraging much advance reading beyond "The Queen Must Die" book. Their method is somewhat different from conventional techniques and it's important that their students get what's on the materials list and not fill their heads so much that there's no room to listen to the teachers or the bees.

"We had one student who had kept bees for seven years and failed miserably. Who knows why he kept trying, but all of a sudden he comes to our class and goes 'Oh...yeah.... this makes sense.' People don't know that there is a difference in techniques. Our goal is to nurture educated, loving, confident beekeepers, because we want to help honeybees. By helping honeybees, we have to help the beekeepers who will take care of them in a sustainable way." ■



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