



Tasting Honey

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Most people don't realize how many different flavors of honey exist so they probably haven't given any thought about how to taste them and pick their favorites. Taste is how we describe what happens on our tongues and Flavor is much more about what happens in our noses.

People have thousands of taste buds on their tongues. There are taste buds on the upper palate, sides of your mouth, and even down your throat. These taste buds are able to differentiate between five basic sensations: sweet, sour, salty, bitter and savory. While food is in your mouth the food molecules move up the back of your throat to your olfactory center. This is where the molecules are translated into flavors. There are also some sensations that you experience when tasting honey that are physical or chemical reactions. All of these sensations combine for the overall mouth experience when tasting honey.

Some people are more sensitive to the bitter sensation than others. They are supertasters. Women are much more likely to be a supertaster than men. Even more powerful than these supertasters is our sense of smell. We all associate smells with memories of people, places and experiences. Smells are so powerful that they can change your mood or emotions without you even being aware. The more variety of smell memories you can consciously remember, the better you will be at tasting the different flavors of honey.

Try out your Taste Buds

If you haven't ever tried tasting or describing honey flavors you might want to train your sense of taste. Gather six small shot glasses or tiny bowls. Label each container as: Salty, Sweet, Sour, Bitter, Savory, or Control. Add 2 ounces of water to each container then add: table salt for Salty, granulated sugar for Sweet, lemon juice or vinegar for Sour, powdered espresso coffee for Bitter, and soy sauce for Savory, and just plain water for the Control. Have a friend line up the containers in a random order making sure to hide the labels from your view. Take a sip from each of the containers and swish it around your mouth to allow it to touch all your taste bud zones. Try to identify each taste category.

Try out your Taste Buds

Now let's develop our ability to describe flavors associated with honey. Choose five to eight of the Honey Flavor Families and collect items for each. Place the sample in a glass container with lid. Sit somewhere quiet and sniff each sample one by one by inhaling through your nose with your mouth closed. The first sniff is the most accurate but take a few more sniffs if you are having a hard time describing each smell. As you inhale each try to describe in words what you smell. Trying this exercise with friends is helpful. Make sure to take a break between smells and don't wear out your olfactory bulb by over smelling. Usually try no more than eight samples at one sitting.



Two types of honey set out for a tasting.

Honey Flavor Families

(Sweet, Spicy, Sour, Bitter, Savory)

Animal – sweat, cat pee, gym bag, leather

Caramel – Confection or Chocolate

Chemical – March to April, light, sweet, fruity

Earthy – soil, mushrooms, potatoes

Fruity – Berry, Citrus, Dried Fruit, Tree Fruit, Tropical Fruit, melon,

Floral – violet, rose, honeysuckle, dried flowers,

Herbaceous – Fresh or Dried

Microbiotical – Lactic or Yeasty

Nutty – walnut, peanut, almond,

Refreshing – peppermint, aromatic

Spice – peppery, zesty, sharp

Spoiled – beer, fermented, vinegar, mold, basement

Vegetal – green stalks, freshly cut grass, hay

Warm – confection, chocolate, coconut, dairy, nuts, marshmallow

Woody – Burnt or Resinous, sawdust, old trunk, attic, clove

Setting up the Honey Tasting

When setting up a Honey Tasting choose a well-lit comfortable space that will be free from noise or odor distractions. You'll also want a table large enough to spread out the honey samples. Avoid eating anything the hour before the tasting, and only drink water. Avoid wearing lotions, colognes, or perfumes as they may interfere with the subtle smells of the honey.

Choose the honeys you want to sample. You might choose to taste similar or greatly different honeys. You might choose to sample local honeys or those from a specific region. For more information on how we get monofloral honeys and those honeys produced in Arizona please see the publication Arizona Specialty Honeys. You also could choose a variety of honeys that vary from light colored to medium to dark colored. When purchasing honey try to choose those bottled in glass as this will preserve their quality. Purchase small (5 to 6 oz.) transparent glass bowls for each of the varieties of honey you will be tasting. Purchase enough small disposable plastic mini tasting spoons so that each person participating can use a different spoon for each sample they will taste. Have a container of new clean spoons labeled 'New' with a few extras just in case someone needs to taste one type of honey twice. Have another container labeled 'Used' for the spoons after they've been used. Place a few spoonful's of honey in each container then cover with plastic wrap to hold the delicate smells inside. Label each of the honey varieties. Set up your samples in order from light to dark and taste them in that same order. Provide everyone with a glass of water to cleanse the palate between honeys. Every participant will also need a piece of paper to record their thoughts about each variety of honey they taste and a copy



Several honeys lined up for honey tasting.

of the Honey Flavor wheel. Keep in mind that you will remember the honeys that you have a strong reaction to the best, either good or bad.



Honey Flavor Wheel available from UC Davis bookstore <https://ucdavisstores.com/MerchDetail?MerchID=1333237>

The Tasting

First take note of how liquid or crystallized the state of the honey may be. This will affect your experience as you taste the honey. Also take note of the color and clarity of the honey. Nectar source will determine the color of the honey. Darker honeys tend to have more minerals and a stronger flavor. Crystallized honeys become lighter in color and honey darkens as it ages.

Next, remove the plastic cover and smell the honey. You may even want to stir the honey around with your spoon to release the volatile compounds so you can really get a good sniff of the honey. Take a deep sniff. Does it remind you of anything? Write down all your impressions. Use the words on the Honey Flavor wheel to help describe your experience.

Now for the best part. Take a small scoop of honey and place it on your tongue. Move it around to coat your entire tongue. Pay attention to how it tasted at the beginning and how it finishes. Also note where it affects your tongue and mouth. Sweet honeys usually interact with the tip of the tongue. Sour will be tasted more in the center or sides of the tongue. Saltiness will be at the tip and center of the tongue. Bitter will be tasted at the back of the tongue. Savory can make your whole mouth water and is tasted throughout your mouth. Compare what you experience with the descriptive words on the Honey Flavor wheel and make notes of how it tasted to you. Once you have written all your notes about the first honey don't forget to cleanse your palate with water and wait a few minutes to move on to the next honey.



Alfalfa honey ready to be tasted

After this first tasting you may be able to see what types of honey you prefer. Continue to taste more varieties in the same flavor family to find more of your favorites.

Pairing Honey

Another fun way to taste honeys is to prepare a charcuterie board that features several honeys paired with a complimentary cheese. You'll need small ramekins for the honey, small spoons or honey dippers for each honey, and you may want to label each honey / cheese pairing. Here are a few to try.



A charcuterie plate ready for a honey pairing party

Cheese Pairings

Cheese – Honey variety

American – Star Thistle, Acacia, Eucalyptus,

Blue – Buckwheat, Chestnut, or subtle honeys like alfalfa and clover, Star thistle, Acacia, Eucalyptus, Tupelo,

Brie – Cranberry, Gallberry, Citrus, Raspberry, Lavender,

Camembert – Gallberry, Citrus,

Cheddar – Bell heather, Ling heather, Rapeseed, Brassica, Saw Palmetto,

Chilean Chonco – Ulmo,

Comte – Chestnut, Buckwheat,

Cottage – Goldenrod,

Feta – Thyme,

Gjetost – Japanese Knotweed

Goat – Dandelion, Macadamia, Mesquite, Orange, Citrus,

Gorgonzola – Chestnut,

Gouda – medium wildflower

Gruyere – Chestnut, Buckwheat, Saw Palmetto,

Havarti – Fireweed
Mozzarella – Citrus, Lavender
Parmesan – Star Thistle, Acacia, Eucalyptus,
Parmigiano-Reggiano – Chestnut, Buckwheat, Saw Palmetto,
Pecorino Romano – Acacia, Saw Palmetto, Tupelo,
Quesillo – Ulmo,
Ricotta – Fireweed, Macadamia,
Smoked Cheddar – Leatherwood
Stilton – Bell heather, Ling Heather
Swiss – Star thistle, Acacia, Eucalyptus,
Val d’Aosta – Rhododendron,



Honey is also delicious when paired with other foods.

Here are some other ideas to try.

Honey Pairings with Food

Acacia* – any cheese, meat, fruit
Ailanthus – tropical fruits,
Alfalfa* – cornbread, baking, teas
Avocado – BBQ sauce, burgers, pulled pork
Basswood – green apples, melon,
Bell Heather – Stilton or cheddar cheese
Blackberry – over cobbler
Blueberry – yogurt, coffee cake
Borage – tea, scones, biscuits,
Buckwheat – blue or strong cheeses, BBQ
Cats Claw* – grilled pork chops,
Chestnut – gorgonzola or blue cheeses

Clover* – toast, teas, scones, biscuits
Coriander – best straight from the spoon
Cranberry – brie, turkey, dark chocolate
Eucalyptus* – salty cheeses, savory meats
Fireweed* – ricotta, nuts, berries
Gallberry – brie, camembert, pecans
Goldenrod – strawberries, nuts, cottage cheese
Honeydew – coffee
Honeysuckle – warm focaccia bread, cheese cake
Japanese Knotweed – Norwegian gjetost cheese, raisin bread, waffles, gingerbread,
Kamahi – granola, fish, meats
Kiawe – lemon curd, chocolate, matcha
Kudzu – roasted carrots,
Lavendar – shortbreads, tea, ice cream
Leatherwood – Tasmanian smoked cheddar, Australian cheeses, sourdough bread,
Ling heather – Stilton or cheddar cheese,
Lychee – smoothies, cantaloupe
Macadamia – ricotta, goat cheeses, fresh pineapple, passion fruit, chocolate,
Manuka – tropical fruits, pancakes, waffles
Meadowfoam – smores, sweet potatoes
Mesquite* – goat cheese, fresh mango,
Lehua – almond butter, coconut, oatmeal
Orange* – goat cheeses, glazes for meat, carrot cake
Raspberry – goat or brie cheese, walnuts, lemonade,
Rhododendron – Val d’Aosta cheese, fresh pears, figs, winter squash
Rosemary – roast lamb, lemon chicken, roasted potatoes
Sage – pasta, mushrooms, pumpkin
Saw Palmetto – hard cheeses, ham, prosciutto,
Star thistle – salty cheeses, kiwi, mango, green melon, banana bread, grilled salmon
Sunflower* – yogurt, biscuits, bread
Thyme – Greek salad, feta, granola,
Tulip poplar – pecan pie, cinnamon toast, bacon, waffles, bran muffins,
Tupelo – blue, aged pecorino, robust cheeses,
Ulmo – Chilean chanco, panquehue, quesillo cheeses,

*indicates honeys that can be produced in Arizona

Citation

Marchese, C. M., & Blackiston, H. (2021). Honey for dummies. For Dummies, a Wiley brand.

Resources:

Honey Flavor Wheel:

<https://www.americanhoneytastingsociety.com/product-page/honey-aroma-and-flavor-wheel>

Honey Tasting Worksheet

Honey name	Color	Aroma	Taste/Flavor	Texture/ Mouthfeel	Finish/ After flavor	Notes



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