Can We Trust the Honey Bear?: Issues Concerning the Origin and Content of America’s Favorite Sweetener

Objectives
The goal of this research is to provide a profile of the honey supply in the United States, focusing on the origins of our honey and the political issues surrounding honey. Specifically, I will focus on the myriad issues surrounding the illegal smuggling of Chinese honey into the United States.

This research ties into a larger theme in food politics—that the very agencies meant to regulate and ensure safe practices in the food industry are failing to provide those services, thus failing to inform and protect consumers.

Summary of Findings

Introduction

As the globalization of the United States food industry becomes more and more important in terms of the choices available to the consumer and the politicization of food safety, the issues surrounding honey epitomize the problems inherent in this system with increased urgency. Today we are faced with a shocking proposition: that over three-fourths of the honey on our supermarket shelves contains zero traces of pollen—the defining quality that makes honey “honey.”¹ This discovery begs the questions, if it’s not honey, what is it, where does it come from, and why has no one told us this before? Herein lie the fundamental issues in understanding the origin and content of our honey supply today. It is important to understand where honey comes from in terms of domestic and foreign sourcing and what is actually in the

honey we buy at the grocery store, because the Food and Drug Administration is failing to inform consumers in these ways, despite having long-term knowledge of problems with the U.S. honey supply. In this report, I will provide an account of where the U.S. honey supply comes from, how much of it can responsibly be considered pure honey, how China has flooded it with a cheap, low-quality, and misleading product, and then outline the shortcomings of the FDA in terms of regulating these issues.

**Honey Production Profile**

In one year, 1.2 million metric tons of honey are produced worldwide.² China, Argentina, and Mexico are the leading producers of honey in the global market, and the United States is the leading importer, along with Japan and the European Union.³ Within the United States, California and the Dakotas are the leading producers of honey, but output is decreasing overall. In 2011, the U.S. was responsible for producing 148,357,000 pounds of honey, down from 176,462,000 pounds in 2010, showing a decrease of 16 percent.⁴ This is highly problematic considering that demand for honey in the United States already exceeds supply, driving the price up.⁵ With domestic honey requiring a higher market price, the opportunity for foreign exporters to flood the U.S. market with a cheaper product has been a consistent problem for U.S. beekeepers. According to the a report by the Seattle Post Intelligencer, “two-thirds of the honey Americans consume is imported and almost half of that, regardless of what’s on the label, comes from China.”⁶ Chinese beekeepers have taken advantage of the high demand for honey in the United States by producing honey cheaply and selling their product at below market prices, thus flooding the U.S. honey market with Chinese honey and hurting domestic producers. This practice led to the 2001 decision by the Federal Trade Commission to impose steep tariffs on imported Chinese honey in the hopes that the taxes would act as a deterrent to Chinese exporters hoping to capitalize on their ability to flood the U.S. market.⁷

**Chinese Honey Smuggling**

Unfortunately, the only thing the tariffs deterred China from was the legal export of honey into the United States. Chinese exporters found ways around the anti-dumping tariffs in order to continue supplying the U.S. market with cheap honey. Their primary tactic was to

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³ Pundyk 2008: 10.
⁵ Pundyk 2008: 10.
⁶ Schneider NOHA 2009: 1.
⁷ Schneider FSN 2011: 5.
launder the honey by exporting their product to other honey-producing nations in Asia, especially India, and changing the country-of-origin labels required on all honey being sold internationally.\(^8\) Subsequently, the European Union banned the import of all honey from India, knowing that their ban on Chinese honey was completely ineffectual in preventing the tainted product from entering their markets due to the Chinese exporters determined effort to simply launder their honey through their neighbor.\(^9\) The United States, however, did not put an outright ban on honey from the region, instead imposing sanctions on China in the hopes that the U.S. honey market would stabilize.\(^10\) Chinese laundering of honey exports made any such luck impossible, as American beekeepers continued to suffer from the dumping of below fair market price honey. The quality of the honey reaching U.S. consumers also suffered as a result.

The Myth of “Pure” Honey in Our Supermarkets

Chinese producers go to great lengths to obscure the origin of the honey and remove potentially harmful toxins that plague the Chinese honey supply. In 2001, honey from China was found to contain the antibiotic chloramphenicol which Chinese beekeepers had been using to treat their diseased bees. They began using a process called ultra-filtration in order to rid the honey of any traces of the chemical, shown to be harmful to humans. Ultra-filtrating honey entails heating the syrup to an extremely high temperature and watering it down significantly. The honey is then forced through minuscule filters. This process removes the chloramphenicol and all other potential toxins, but also strips the honey of all pollen content.\(^11\) Not only is pollen considered to be the essential component of what makes honey honey, it is also the only way to identify where a certain stock of honey comes from. Thus, the ultra-filtration process serves two major purposes for Chinese exporters. First, filtering ensures that their honey will not be banned in the United States if it were to be tested at any point for antibiotics. Second, American honey packers who test the honey for its country of origin are unable to find that the product came from China, which perpetuates the now widespread practice of laundering through other countries.

Once the Chinese honey hits the U.S. market under false country of origin labels, the next problem lies in the practices of the largest honey packing companies. Schneider’s report for Food Safety News outlines the experiment carried out by Vaughn Bryant, a melissopalynologist of Texas A&M University in which more than 60 samples of honey were bought in 10 different states and analyzed for pollen content.\(^12\) His results showed that 76 percent of the samples from grocery stores had all of their pollen removed, 100 percent of the honey purchased at drugstores contained no pollen, 77 percent of the honey from “big-box” stores had no pollen, 100 percent of individually packaged honey from fast-food chains contained no pollen, and 100 percent of

\(^8\) Schneider FSN 2011: 5. 
\(^12\) Schneider FSN 2011: 2. Note: a melissopalynologist is someone who investigates pollen in honey.
honey sampled from natural foods stores contained the amount of pollen expected for honey that has not been ultra-filtered.\textsuperscript{13}

Food Safety News compiled a list of honey brands that were found to contain no pollen. The list includes over 30 brands, including some with labels like “Busy Bee Organic Honey,” “Haggen Honey, Natural & Pure,” Natural Sue Bee Clover Honey,” and “Silver Bow Pure Honey” (emphasis added). The use of misleading words like ‘organic’, ‘pure’, and ‘natural’ to describe honey that has been proven to contain no pollen and therefore can be assumed to have undergone ultra-filtration is a disturbing use of false advertising on the part of the honey packers who make these claims. This means that U.S. honey distributors either know about the true origin of their honey and are purposefully misleading their customers to believe that it is not, in fact, and ultra-filtered product of China, or they are not practicing stringent tests on the honey they market as “pure.” Both possibilities are unacceptable in that the consumers will always be left in the dark about the true origins and content of the honey they buy and eat. The obvious next question is: what is the FDA doing to prevent the shady practices on the part of Chinese honey exporters and big honey packing companies in the United States?

**FDA Shortcomings**

In May of 2011, the American Beekeeping Federation defined its “legislative priorities” for the year and identified “protecting our honey market” as one of four major objectives. Protecting the U.S. honey market entails “establishing a national standard of identity for honey and stopping illegal imports, particularly transshipment of Chinese honey through intermediary countries.” According to the ABF, the standard of identity proposal that the bee industry submitted to the FDA in 2006 was received with promises by the agency to implement it and has subsequently been ignored.\textsuperscript{14} The standard is a simple one: U.S. honey producers want the FDA to require that “nothing can be added or removed from the honey.”\textsuperscript{15} John Ambrose of North Carolina State University has been pressuring the FDA since 1975 to establish a national honey standard, and all efforts between then and now have resulted in an endless stream of promises from the FDA with no actual move towards implementation.\textsuperscript{16}

The European Union has proven to be much more willing to address similar concerns. The Union has developed regulations on labeling which require that ‘pollen’ actually be listed as an ingredient on honey, meaning that retailers will actually need to test the honey they buy for pollen content before they sell to consumers.\textsuperscript{17} The United Nations’ Codex Alimentarius also has much stricter standards for honey than the FDA. They have established a standard of identity which requires that “no pollen or constituent particular to honey may be removed.”\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15] Schneider FSN 2011: 10, quoting John Ambrose.
\item[16] Schneider FSN 2011: 10.
\item[17] Huffington Post 2011: 2.
\item[18] Schneider FSN 2011: 6.
\end{footnotes}
The standard has been set. The FDA need only follow the example of international trade expectations and deliver on the promises they made over 30 years ago.

Conclusions

The news on honey is disturbing, but not entirely unexpected. Honey issues follow the current trend of food politics in the United States that more and more, we have to be skeptical of the labels on our food and we cannot rely on the FDA to effectively guide us in our consumption decisions. This is the danger inherent to a free-market system applied to food. The product with the potential for the most profit will win out over a more expensive, higher-quality product the majority of the time. If honey packing companies in the United States were willing to pay more, sacrificing some potential profit, in order to ensure that the product they are buying is high-quality, we would not be faced with the reality that three-fourths of honey in our supermarkets is not even really honey. However, this is not realistic, because it is not how our free market economy works. Yet, with the plethora of other difficult choices facing Americans at the supermarket, we should not have to worry that the honey we have bought for years is illegally sourced from China, contains antibiotics, or is not in fact honey. Therefore, the responsibility lies on government agencies like the FDA to work harder to impose regulations that will protect consumers from the system that allows fake honey to be labeled “pure.”
Sources


