

US Honey: A Taste for Every Preference

Americans have enjoyed honey since 1622, when European settlers brought honey bees to the United States.¹ In the United States, honey is available in over 300 unique varieties.² Honey differs in color and taste depending on the plants from which bees obtain nectar, the soil the plant grows in, the temperature, and even rainfall affecting the plants' growth.³ There are many sources of nectar for delicious honey flavors and the growing season, as well as soil, affects the honey. Light-colored honey has a mild taste while darker honey has a strong flavor.⁴ There are three categories of honey based on nectar: monofloral, predominately from one type of flower, polyfloral, from many wildflowers, and blended, at least two types of honey mixed together. Honey may be in many forms, and is graded based on USDA standards.⁵

Clover honey, the most common type of monofloral honey, has a mild delicious taste and is clear or light in color. Two species of clover grown in the United States are yellow sweet clover (*Melilotus officinalis*) and white sweet clover (*Melilotus alba*), as well as others.^{3,6} Clover improves the quality of the soil, but quality of clover honey depends on how the honey is handled (free of impurities), whether bees collect only clover nectar, and if the honey is made in the late spring or summer.⁷ Sage honey, as well, has many varieties of tasty, light honey. The sage plant (*Salvia mellifera*) grows along the California coast. In Florida, California, Arizona, and Texas, orange trees (*Epilobium angustibolium*) bloom in March and April. Honey bees use their nectar to produce a delicious honey with a light amber color and the scent of orange blossoms. Blueberry honey (*Vaccinium spp.*) is made in New England and Michigan where blueberry plants grow. It does not have added flavor, but its taste comes from nectar of the tiny white blueberry flowers. Like clover and orange blossom honey, it is clear and amber, but slightly darker; all are used for cooking or just eating. The alfalfa plant (*Medicago sativa*), is the most important honey plant in Utah, Nevada, Idaho, and Oregon. Alfalfa honey is light amber or even white, and is popular for eating. Tupelo honey, a light, mild honey which rarely crystalizes, is from the tupelo tree (*Nyssa ogeche*) in southeastern US, which is a protected plant.³ Honey from the eucalyptus plant, which has over 500 species, has a medicinal taste and is used for healing and for malaria (a serious disease from mosquitos).⁸ The fireweed (*Epilobium angustibolium*), a tall pink-flowered plant, grows in the northern and pacific states and produces a water white honey. Buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) grows in well-drained soil and cool climates in the spring, and can even thrive in infertile soil. Unlike many other popular honeys, buckwheat honey is dark brown with a strong, rich taste making it a good choice for barbecue sauce. Wildflower honey is also dark, with a strong, sweet flavor, but is polyfloral – the nectar bees use to make this honey changes every year and depends on the type of flowers blooming.^{3,5}

Many different forms of honey are used on the table, in foods, and just to eat. Liquid honey, the most popular, is strained or centrifuged so it is easy to cook with or eat. Comb honey is honey taken from the bee hive with the chewy beeswax. Cut comb is liquid honey with honey comb. Spreadable honey, or whipped honey, is honey that has been crystallized by heating, but is different from naturally crystallized honey. Some manufacturers add flavors to whipped honey to give it distinct flavors, such as cinnamon, blueberry, raspberry, or lemon. It is important to store honey in a cool environment, with a sealed lid to maintain its taste and color.⁵

The USDA grades honey color from water white to dark amber based on optical density and the Pfund scale. At stores, consumers buy honey which is graded categories A, B, and C. These categories are determined by water content, flavor, smell, clarity, and presence of defects or particles. Grade A and B honey both have a water content of less than 18.6 % but are different because grade B may contain air bubbles or pollen particles. Grade C honey must be less than 20% water and may have particles, but they do not seriously affect the appearance.^{9,10}

Processing of honey may affect its taste and color. Heating the honey in the pasteurization process kills yeast cells which may ferment and spoil the honey, liquefies crystals, and destroys bacteria; however, it also reduces enzymes and may change the appearance. Raw honey has more pollen and consumers with allergies prefer to eat it, hoping it may help their hay fever or other conditions. Ultrasonification of honey is a process to destroy most yeast cells and crystals without heat.⁵

Americans delight in many varieties of honey from mild, light flavors, to rich, strong tastes. Honey is delicious whether from one flower or many, whether whipped or liquid, and whether raw or pasteurized. From the table to baking, honey is enjoyed day to day.

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