

Prepping Extracted Honey for a Honey Show

The extracted honey division takes up the largest portion of the show and has classes of dark, amber, light amber and light. Preparing honey for show is a good bit different than preparing your honey for your own table or that of friends, family, or farmers markets. Most of us would prefer our honey as minimally processed as possible and our own personal judging would probably be based on flavor. But show standards are different. The honey is judged on cleanliness, absence of crystals, absence of foam, uniformity of filling, lack of defects in the jar and lid, and moisture content. To get a high score, you need to warm your honey to remove all crystals and you need to filter the honey so there is no trace of lint, pollen, or other matter. The honey will be viewed through a polarized light box, so any floating foreign matter or crystals are readily visible to the judge. Its water content will be measured with a refractometer. Interestingly, although judges do taste each jar of honey, they are only checking to be sure there is no "off" flavor that might indicate fermentation, overheating, or contamination. You don't get extra points for wonderful flavor!

So what are some of the tricks to getting a high score? A copy of the standard NJBA scoring sheet is printed in this issue so you can see how many points various factors are worth.

First, pick three jars as nearly perfect as you can find. If you hold an empty honey jar up to the light, you'll notice the glass has many defects: wavy lines, little bubbles, nicks and dimples. You may have to go through half a dozen cases of jars to find three that are free of such defects. Only one pound classic or queenline glass jars are acceptable. It's just as hard to find three perfect lids, especially if you use metal lids, which are especially vulnerable to dents and chipped paint. But find them you must. Points will be deducted for defects in the jars and lids.

Next, prepare your honey. This is a several day process. Be sure to extract honey within three days of pulling it and only take honey that is at least 75% capped. That is generally enough to put the moisture content within the acceptable range of 15.5% to 18.6%. If you have a refractometer, you can check the reading but if not, don't lose sleep over it. Let's assume you have your honey in a pail such as a clean five gallon plastic bucket. You need to warm that honey to melt any crystals and make it easier to filter and pour. I have made myself a "bucket warmer" using a thermostat I got from Walter T. Kelley Co., an insulated Igloo cooler on wheels, a couple of inexpensive light sockets and some wiring. There are various plans on-line for such warmers. Here's one I found:

<http://www.beegeek.com/filepage/files/Build%20a%20Great%20Honey%20Heater.pdf>

There are also inexpensive belt-type bucket warmers you can get through the bee supply houses. However you do it, it is important to gently warm your honey to remove crystals. Some beekeepers will bring the honey to around 120° or even higher, but I have found a temperature of 100 to 105° held for a couple of days works just as well and holds less risk of burning the honey.

Once the honey has been warmed to remove existing crystals, filter it to get rid of lint and dirt. Brushy Mountain has a nice filtering set up with a double 5 gallon bucket, the top one of which has the bottom cut out of it and a rigid metal screen in place of its bottom. A cloth filter can then be placed over the metal screen and the honey poured through it. Running the honey through a fine cloth filter several times while it is still warm will remove undesirable solid particles. In this set up, the bottom bucket also has a honey gate so you can pour the filtered honey directly into your jars. It goes without saying that all the equipment must be scrupulously clean.

There are tricks to filling the jars, too. Hold the jar below the gate at a slight angle so the honey falls in the middle of one side rather than on the bottom. This creates less turbulence and fewer bubbles. Fill to the bottom thread of the jar neck – the point at which the lid just hides the surface of the honey when it is screwed on. Each of the three jars must be filled to exactly the same point.

There must be no foam on the surface of the honey. I generally give it a little time for any bubbles generated in pouring to rise to the top and then very carefully, with a toothpick or lightly moistened Q-tip, remove any foam. Some judges will deduct points for an entry that has honey on the inside of the cap so most people put a bit of plastic wrap on the jar before screwing the lid on. This keeps the lid clean during transport. And I know I'll see a lot of entries arriving in socks to keep the outside of the jars clean.

Holding your jars of honey up against the sun or a bright light will let you see how well you did.

Next time, we'll talk about how to prepare your wax for show. Good luck with that honey!

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