A Beekeeper in New York City

by Ewa Bronowicz

Andrew Cote on top of The Bridge Cafe in lower Manhattan, under the Brooklyn Bridge, working with honeybees. (By Andrew Sullivan)

Contrary to conventional New Yorker wisdom, Andrew Coté, a fourth generation beekeeper and a celebrity in NYC's beekeeping world, said that the biggest danger of urban beekeeping is not getting stung by a bee but falling off a roof. "Many people keep hives next to the edge of a rooftop, and if a bee happens to fly into their nose, they could lose balance, panic, and fall off," he explained. His advice to the neighbors of NYC beekeepers is, "Don't kick the hives." "The danger of getting attacked by a bee is only in people's mind. Honeybees are not aggressive towards humans."

The first time I met Andrew Coté was at the Union Square Greenmarket on 14th Street where in peak season 140 regional farmers, bakers, fishermen, and beekeepers sell their products to those who are willing to support local agriculture, even if it means paying a higher price than in chain grocery stores. Coté's stand features a wide variety of honey: Blackberry, Blueberry, Buckwheat, named after their flowers, and Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens, named after their place of origin. He also sells other bee products: royal jelly, pollen, propolis, beeswax candles and soaps. Prices range from $5 to $20, depending on size and type. Next to a large sign which read "Andrew's Honey," there was a board with Coté's picture with Martha Stewart, and several articles written about him in *The New York Times* and Bon Appetit, as well as German and Japanese magazine articles. When Coté, who is 39, arrived, he welcomed me with a big smile and a spoonful of whipped honey, which he offers to his customers. As we started talking, a woman who was working on a documentary about beekeeping appeared, and said that her appointment had been scheduled for the same time as mine. "I messed up," Coté said simply, and asked the other woman to return later.

While beekeeping in NYC has a long history, it is the recent legalization of beekeeping that has brought it into the spotlight. On March 15th 2010, The New York Department of Health and Mental Hygiene voted unanimously to lift its decade-old beekeeping ban, which had put honeybees in the same category as poisonous snakes and hyenas. I asked Coté if he'd celebrated that day. He sees the increase in beekeeping as a

double-edge sword. “It’s wonderful that there is more interest in beekeeping, but there are also more possibilities for irresponsible or inexperienced people getting involved,” he explained, and mentioned swarms on lampposts as one negative consequence of uneducated beekeeping. “If I had it my way, I’d make it obligatory for people to go through a certification process, to make sure everyone knows what they’re doing,” he said. Coté estimates that there are about 250 New Yorkers who tend hives, and a total of 250 hives in all. He himself owns 240 hives, 40 of them in NYC: some in Manhattan, some in Brooklyn, and some in Queens, on rooftops, balconies, and in community gardens.

Honeybees represent only a fraction of the approximately 20,000 known species of bees. The honeybee season runs from March through October. Inside a hive, called a colony, there is a hierarchy: one fertile queen, the most important bee which lives for three to four years, a few thousand drones (male bees) that die upon mating (“They leave more than their heart there,” Coté commented), and some sterile female worker bees that live for approximately six weeks. Each hive can produce up to 100 pounds of honey per year. Bees also produce pollen, beeswax, and propolis (a mixture that honeybees collect from tree buds and other botanical sources). I asked Coté why eating local honey was good for us. “You should know this,” he gestured to his employee, Anastasia, a young woman who is a recent law school graduate and a honey enthusiast. She didn’t. “Educate us,” she said, somewhat playfully. “Eating local honey can help relieve the discomfort of allergies because bees use pollen from local plants, which is where our honey comes from.” He added that honey contains vitamins, minerals, and amino acids and is a natural beauty supplement that nourishes the skin and hair. Andrew’s Honey, which has become a recognized brand, is filled with antioxidants and acts as an antibacterial and antifungal agent and helps disinfect wounds and burns.” For the bees to make one pound of honey, they must collectively visit one million flowers and travel over 55,000 miles, which is farther than twice around the Earth. “It is a lot of work,” Coté continued. It is also a lot of work for any beekeeper, and especially the ones that choose to build their own hives, which Coté does. (It takes him about four hours to build one hive.) Bees are sold by the pound-10 to 12 thousand per three pound package, and Coté drives over a thousand miles each way down to Georgia at least once a year to buy bees at the beginning of the bee season.

When I told Coté I was about to ask him some personal questions, he jokingly said he loved personal questions. I asked him to tell me about his family history and beekeeping. His great grandfather kept bees in Quebec, and so did his daughter, Coté’s grandmother. After the family moved to the States, Coté’s father began keeping bees in Connecticut. Coté was eight at the time. “I have in one way or another kept my hands sticky all my life.” He now works with his father at Silvermine Apiary, home of Andrew’s Honey, in Norwalk, Connecticut. At Silvermine Apiary, as in NYC, Coté produces 100% pure, local, raw, kosher honey. The process consists of removing it from the hives while it is in the frames, uncapping it from the comb with a knife, spinning out the combs using centrifugal force, filtering them through cloth to avoid wax particles, and finally bottling it.

Coté’s own personal history is interesting. Several articles refer to him as a high school dropout, as well as a Fulbright professor. Asked how he became a high school dropout, he said: “By dropping out of high school.” He was 15 and lost interest in his

studies. He travelled around the world for a couple of years, in Europe, North Africa, and Hong Kong. When a few years later he filled out an application to attend his local community college, Norwalk Community College, he lied saying that he had graduated from high school, and promised to bring in his diploma. No one ever asked him about it again. “I think I’m the only Fulbright professor with no high school diploma,” he said, and added that I was getting all of his secrets. “But I don’t care because I’m no longer in higher education.” He now holds two master’s degrees, one in TESOL and one in Spanish, and started a PhD from Yale in Middle Eastern studies, which he abandoned for bees. He lived in Japan, and speaks fluent Japanese; he also lived in Ecuador and Cuba and speaks fluent Spanish. He taught in the Republic of Moldova (through the Fulbright in Applied Linguistics), Ecuador, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and the Greenwich, Connecticut public school system. He had been a full time literature professor at Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport, Connecticut, for the past few years, until three weeks ago, when he quit. “I am now a full-time beekeeper,” he said with a smile.

Andrew Cote and one of his employees, Anastasia, at his stand with honey at Union Square Market. (By Ewa Bronowicz)

Halfway through the interview, Coté needed a bathroom break and said I could follow him, to “walk and talk.” We entered an office building across the street from the market, and headed to the tenth floor. Since public toilets in New York City are scarce, I asked Coté if this is an arrangement between the market and the vendors. “I make my own arrangements in life,” he explained, adding that a customer had given him a code to this particular bathroom. When we walked back to the Union Square Market, we saw a group of kindergarteners all wearing orange shirts and holding on to a rope. “Are these prisoners?” he asked one of the teachers, who smiled uncomfortably. Coté’s joie-de-vivre can be contagious. He went over to a stand with a large sign that read “Duck.” “What is it?” he asked the vendor. She laughed whole-heartedly. “That’s why I ask what it is,” he told me as we approached his own stand. “Her sign is as big as mine but people still ask what I sell. I say, ‘Your mother.’ What could it be?”

My second meeting with Coté was scheduled at Grand Central Terminal. "You're on time," he said graciously when he materialized out of the crowd at 9:30am sharp. "I wouldn't have waited if you weren't," he added, half-smiling. It was a cold but brisk first day of December. Coté was dressed in a black Champion sweatshirt and a pair of blue jeans. We exited the station. Our destination was the legendary Waldorf=Astoria, a luxury hotel on Park Avenue. Coté was going for a consultation with the hotel's culinary chef regarding installing beehives on the hotel's rooftop. "It's the new thing and everyone with money is doing it," Coté explained.

He had flown to Paris this year to discuss the beehives on Louis' Vuitton's Parisian rooftop, where his friend is in charge of beehives for Vuitton. Coté is now in talks to do the same on Vuitton's commercial space on Fifth Ave and 57th Street. I said I was surprised to hear that such luxury brands would choose to get their hands dirty for a jar of honey. "They want the publicity," Coté said, and went on to explain that beekeeping is good for the environment; it's going green; and it's producing local honey. He believes, without any trace of modesty, that he can bring in publicity. "He's like a magnet for the press," his girlfriend, Yuliana, who is originally from Ukraine, said. Within the last year he has been seen, heard, or read about on The Martha Stewart Show, the BBC, NPR, PBS, CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, NHK, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times of London*, to name a few. When he'd been told by his then-boss to keep his beekeeping and his teaching separate, he asked why. "It's the only time your college has ever been mentioned in *The New York Times*, and it never will be again," he recalled, speaking about the community college where he'd worked until recently. "It didn't earn me a lot of love." He also mentioned the Bridge Café, a popular restaurant near the Brooklyn Bridge in Manhattan, where he had installed six beehives and paid for the materials himself. They got publicity and honey, Coté said with pride. "But I need to start thinking like a businessman," he added. We walked through an open lobby where there was breakfast food laid out on the table. Coté grabbed a bagel. "Otherwise I'll have to steal bagels for the rest of my life."

At the Waldorf =Astoria we were welcomed by David Garcelon, Director of Culinary. He is a tall man and his white hat made him look even taller. We took the elevator to the 20th floor. The rooftop appeared to be under construction, with pieces of wood on the ground and peeling paint. The view of Midtown Manhattan's skyscrapers, with the elegant Chrysler Building on the left, was spectacular. "It's a lot better than I expected," Coté said. He had been concerned that the 20th floor might be too high for bees, and was happy to see the walls on the rooftop that would work as wind barriers. He took out a camera to take photos of "what I might not see right now." The chef explained that the idea was to build a luxury accommodation for bees. Garcelon, who had participated in a similar project at a hotel in Toronto, knew what he was talking about. He wanted six beehives, and envisioned a garden on the rooftop, as well as tours. He would use the bee products in the hotel's restaurants, and give honey to their most valued customers. While one beehive could produce 100 pounds of honey a year, "you're lucky if you get any honey the first year," Coté told Garcelon. Garcelon mentioned water problems at the Toronto hotel. "Oh, I have that solved," Coté waved his hand, and explained the logistics of getting water to the rooftop. Garcelon confirmed Coté's statement: the Waldorf=Astoria wanted beekeeping for publicity. (Coté would send them a proposal that night. If he were to do it, he would build the six hives and install them on

the rooftop in March. In April, he would bring the bees, and visit the hives every week until the end of the season, in October.)

A swarm of bees on a tree at 57th Street and 5th Avenue in Manhattan. (By Andrew Cote)

As we were taking the elevator down, Coté asked if President Obama, who had been in NYC the day before, stayed at the hotel. He didn't, but his room was always ready, as he only stayed at the Waldorf =Astoria when in town . The conversation turned back to honey, and Coté lamented that it was nearly impossible to get the White House honey. (The White House produces its own honey.) "I would rather meet the beekeeper than the President," he confessed. At Coté's question about finding a good place to eat in the neighborhood, Garcelon invited us to brunch at one of the hotel's restaurants. Coté was optimistic about the prospects of collaborating with the hotel, and had a similar interview at the Four Seasons lined up in the coming weeks.

When I showed up for my third meeting with Coté, there was a different helper at his stand, another young woman who had started working for Coté the previous summer after chatting to him about her interest in honey at the Union Square Greenmarket. "I'm going to be writing while we're talking," he warned me, and his divided attention skills were impressive—he was able to write the names of honey on different jars while answering my questions. I first read him his own quote from *The New York Times* article: "Honey is always a miracle. It's the one food on earth that does not spoil. It can be eaten, sold, traded for just the tiniest edge to survive." Coté doubted whether he used the word "miracle." "That doesn't sound like me," he said. "But I did say it's the only food that never spoils. It doesn't spoil because I believe bacteria cannot grow in it. Honey lasts forever," he repeated. "Honey is like a mother's love," he added after a short reflection.

While there are no nationalistic differences between bees, there are traits that are different. Coté explained that honeybees have been bred from different strains of them that are indigenous to different parts of the world. For example, Russian bees are hardier in the winter, and tend to gather more propolis. Italian bees are gentler, and breed faster in the Spring. "Bees are different just like people are different. They are no absolutes."

Since I didn't want to ask Coté a question that most beekeepers would find annoying—whether they get stung—I asked him what the worst thing that could happen to him would be. "I've been in two wars, I think the worst is over," he said and pondered on the question. "People could stop buying my honey." He also added that getting stung in the nose is the most painful beekeeping experience. "And I've been stung in many other places," he clarified.

Coté's advice to new beekeepers is to take the course with the NYC Beekeepers Association and read some books. And, most importantly, one must first find a place for one's hive. "I've had people buy bees and say they now have to find place for their hive. As a steward of bees, I say that they are beautiful creatures and deserve respect," Coté said. While beekeeping is a relatively low-maintenance and inexpensive endeavor, Coté warned that if one calculates the cost, the time investment, and the amount of honey that one beehive can produce, it's a poor investment. "If you want to make a small fortune in beekeeping, the best thing is to start with a big fortune and dwindle it down," he concluded. While beekeeping is still illegal in many communities across the U.S. and around the world, equipment sales were up 25 % in the U.S.A. in 2011, he informed me. "In a sense this is bad for the bees, because suppliers have to breed more bees, and they pay less attention to health, more to productivity," he went on. This seems to be an inevitable consequence of the commercialization of any product.

Coté can be helpful and charming to his customers, or somewhat rude to those who deserve it. (About one third of his customers are regulars, although he reminded me that honey is not like lettuce—you buy it and then you don't need to buy it again for a month.) He chats and jokes with most of the people who come by his stand, but has no patience with people who don't respect him or his products. On the day I was there, a middle-aged woman opened a jar of Coté's honey and placed her nose directly on the bottle, her nostrils hovering millimeters from the honey within. He raised his voice at her, and took the jar away. The woman seemed confused and upset but also determined to find the honey she was looking for. She asked Coté to let her smell the honey she had opened. Coté opened another jar for her. The woman seemed pleased with the smell, and purchased the honey. "But please don't yell at your customers," she said as she handed him the money. Coté acknowledged her remark but told her to think before she acts next time around. "I'm best in small doses," he explained to me later. Shortly after the incident, a large woman bought beeswax, for $6 for a little over half a pound, and Coté asked her, with genuine curiosity, what she would use it for. She explained that she had dry skin and couldn't find a lotion that worked. She was going to make one with coconut oil, olive oil and beeswax. When I spoke to another one of his employees, a young woman named Cecilia, who studies philosophy and Spanish, and dreams of being a farmer one day, she described Coté as "intense, careful, fair and hilarious." She eats her boss' pollen in oatmeal for breakfast every day. "It's a great source of protein and energy," she said with genuine enthusiasm.

Coté is the founder of two non-profit organizations, Bees Without Borders and the New York City Beekeepers Association. NYCBA started as a resource for beeping in NYC. The Association offers beekeeping classes and monthly workshops on topics ranging from swarm prevention to the recent research on Colony Collapse Disorder. The NYCBA receives calls from the NYPD and the New York Fire Department in case of swarms or other bee-related emergencies. It has approximately 250 paying members. Bees Without Borders, on the other hand, consists of a small group of people and is a

charity organization. (10% of every honey Coté sells goes to it.) “We teach beekeeping as means of poverty elevation,” Coté explained. He’d just cancelled a trip to Uganda due to security concerns and scheduled a trip to Kenya instead, for this coming January. I asked if he ever considered going to the Czech Republic. “They have a well established bee industry, so they don’t need us” he answered, adding that the focus of BWB is helping in developing areas.

Andrew Cote on a friend's balcony on 17th street and 6th Avenue in Manhattan, with the Empire State Building in the background, holding a frame of solid honey. (By Andrew Sullivan)

An American woman stopped by the stand and said that she needed honey for her Russian husband. “They take honey seriously there.” Coté nodded. “You ask most Russians, they will say nothing is as good in America as in Russia. If it’s so G-d damn good, just stay in Russia,” Coté commented. The woman laughed, and bought the buckwheat honey, which seems to be a bestseller. Another woman asked for honey for her baby with a chest cold, and Coté recommended the buckwheat honey. “Hot water, lemon, garlic or ginger mixed with this honey,” he said, adding that “it also keeps away vampires.” The woman looked at Coté with suspicion. A man pointed to several jars of honey and asked about the price. Coté, his voice slightly annoyed, said that the price was on the jars. “My customer service with humans is sometimes wanting, but I really like working with bees,” he explained, without any remorse.