

‘Mom and pop’ store offers a taste of local and exotic raw honeys

By Tantri Wija

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Located on the corner of South St. Francis Drive and Paseo de Peralta, directly across from Owl Liquors, is an enigmatic, intriguing business called the Honey Salon. It appeared about two months ago, and you may have driven by it — a small, residential-looking house with a merry roadside stand in front of it and a large sign proclaiming its existence framed by rows of bright chile ristras and a table lined with several jars of sweet golden goo.

First of all, the Honey Salon is not a “salon.” There are no hairdressers, no manicurists, no facials. It is rather a “salon” in the older sense of the word, a welcoming enclave where you can go to discover, discuss and appreciate everything and anything about honey. It feels more like a wine shop or a whiskey tasting room, but instead of fermented grains, you’re sampling honey.

The interior is mostly unassuming — a desk, a tiny refrigerator, some beautiful wreaths for sale, a table of honey and beeswax beauty products. But the central feature is a wall of honey, gleaming like jars of amber in the afternoon sun, each organized with hand-drawn coded symbols like magic potions.

The Honey Salon’s owner, Gadiel Ramirez, will happily and enthusiastically guide you through your salon experience. The Honey Salon is a true “mom-and-pop” joint — the business is in the front of the house, and Ramirez lives with his wife, Marta, and their young baby in the back. The honey they sell is produced or supplied by Bee Chama Honey, a family company based out of Socorro.

If you’re used to having only one kind of honey, or God forbid, grocery store honey, Ramirez’s collection of 23 honeys will be initially overwhelming. These honeys are all different colors, ranging from creamy white to maple-syrup brown, some are hard and some gooey, some smooth and some “chunky,” as he puts it.

Ramirez has a healthy collection of local honeys, including Desert Wild Flower from the Rio Grande Valley, but you won’t find his honey at the Santa Fe Farmers Market because most of his Bee Chama Honey collection isn’t local, acquired instead through a friendly network of “like-minded people” across



honey

The Santa Fe Honey Salon & Farm Shop is on the corner of Paseo de Peralta and South St. Francis Drive. Jane Phillips/The New Mexican

the Western states who trade their artisanal honey barrel for barrel. He has buckwheat honey from Washington state, which according to Ramirez is the “darkest honey in the United States” that has top notes of maple syrup and evokes the smell of horses in your head when you taste it. Meadowfoam honey from Oregon tastes exactly like chocolate or marshmallows; orange blossom honey is zingy, with a definite citrusy aftertaste, perfect for sprinkling on fruit. He has eucalyptus honey, carrot flower honey, even date palm honey from the date groves of Indio, Calif., that does in fact have the distinctively caramelly tang of dates.

Ramirez also has local honey from the Mountain Gambel Oak, which is made from tree sap instead of nectar from flowers. “In my collection of 23 honeys, it’s the only honey that has that characteristic,” explains Ramirez. “It takes four to seven years for the right conditions to happen — it needs to be a drought. If there’s no wildflowers in the mountain, the bees ... will go to the gambel oak to make honey.”

The honey is all “extra virgin, unfiltered and raw,” which means, essentially, that it is as the bees made it, without any adulteration, additives or processing. “Ours is pure versus a bunch of funny things added to your honey,” explains Ramirez, funny things including high fructose corn syrup and, depressingly enough, “honey flavor.”

“Raw” means that Bee Chama’s honey is unpasteurized and “full of nutrients and alive,” explains Ramirez. He says processed honey is heated to allow it to pass through the tubings in machinery so it can be automatically packed. Bee Chama’s honey is also unfiltered, which means, according to Ramirez, “that it has all the extra goodness floating in there — something that the commercial operations take away right away so their lines don’t get clogged with goodness.”

By “goodness,” Ramirez means the remnants of wax, impurities and bee enzymes that actually are sold as a byproduct by Bee Chama Honey and the Honey Salon as a surprisingly divine substance called “cappings.” Ramirez explains that when a barrel of honey is decanted into jars, the very last jar in the barrel contains the lighter impurities and wax, and, he warned, possibly bee legs and things like that, none of which sounds edible but which turns out to be frothy and grainy and delicious and tastes exactly like warm, honey-flavored ice cream.

Ramirez describes the Honey Salon as a “work in progress,” intending it to ultimately be an “outlet for all the things produced on the farm.” Currently, he also sells blocks of beeswax, beeswax candles and woven wreaths. And a big part of the concept is about health; Ramirez has a plethora of local honey, long lauded as a cure for allergies. Their Desert Wild Flower is collected in the Pecos Wilderness and probably contains everything that’s making you sneeze in a given spring, summer or fall. He also has other bee products, like bee pollen, which some consider to be a superfood.

“We have the fresh multicolored pollen, which is very different from the one in the store, which is commonly dehydrated,” he explains. “[It’s a] mix from the hives in the mountains and the desert. It will get your energy levels up; it will boost your immune system.” He explains that when he’s out in the

desert in a full-body beekeeping suit, a handful of bee pollen keeps him powering through until the job is done.

The Honey Salon is open every day, with, as Ramirez puts it, “flexible hours.” When you drop by the Santa Fe Honey Salon, give yourself a generous few minutes to a half hour at least, because Ramirez will want you to taste as many of his honeys as possible while he explains their origins in fascinating detail.

“The goal for us is to offer [people] a taste of honey,” he explains. “People come in and taste many different honeys, back to back,” giving you a sommelier-like appreciation for the nuances and differences of the produce of America’s bees.