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Hive of Activity

Honey-making business is buzzing

"As much as we can, we try to promote that idea there's lots of good food out there, and hopefully, we are just one of the players in that movement back to less processed food."

BY WENDY KING

Once a honey farmer sells a crop and sees it loaded onto a truck, they pretty much wave goodbye. Someone else will be in charge of processing and packaging that honey.

But if a producer holds a portion of their crop in reserve, they can have complete control over the way it's handled and sold. By keeping it a natural, unprocessed, fully traceable food item, the farmer can package, market and sell it as a premium product.

That's the strategy Tim and Isabel Wendell are using to sell their premium Wendell Estate Honey.

The couple run Wendell Honey Farm along with their marketing company, Wendell Estate Honey, which markets the farm's premium artisan honey. The product is sold in small, beautifully designed jars as a higher-end retail product, as opposed to the bulk honey, which is sold to a packer distributor.

"There are two reasons we decided to go with marketing in smaller containers," says Isabel Wendell.

"One is to put out a really natural product for people from our farm, and the other is that like any other crop you sell to whomever will buy it, there are a lot of ups and downs — that's just how the farming business is.

"But if we can sell a portion of our farm crop as a premium product through our marketing company, then that will level off the big ups and downs."

Balancing the market makes the farm business more stable because the farmers can set their own price. But being an artisan producer isn't just about a clever marketing strategy. Traceability and responsiveness to customers are requirements.

"We are watching all the way along and we work from breeding the bees at our farm to selling to the retailer," says Wendell.

"If you go to where your food is produced, then you know where your food comes from and you know the people who are producing it," she says.

"We want to present a premium product because it is only us. That's what we do — that's what we make, so there is a certain amount of responsibility."

She says being present at every step makes everything more pronounced for them.

"We hear the feedback from people from, 'Oh this is the best honey! This is great!' All those wonderful things — but if we have a little problem we also hear about that, because we are part of the total," she says.

"So we take care at every step just as much as we know how to do, and if somebody calls us we want to be available so that you are talking to the person who makes the honey."

The Wendell Estate name continues to gain popularity, helped by a televised kick-start. Martin Neuhofer, who is in charge of product development and sales at Wendell Estate, successfully represented the company on CBC-TV's *Dragons' Den* in 2013.

"We think that Martin did a wonderful job on *Dragons' Den*," says Wendell.

"We thought that it was the best advertising that we could have had — we were new, so it was just a real boost."

Sales went up. "I think it really helps to have somebody on your TV tell you this is a good product," she says.

"*Dragons' Den* hits a lot of people and a lot of people respect them and like them."

The company is starting to stretch its legs a bit and they've purchased some room to accommodate growth.

"Our marketing company has purchased the old co-op in Roblin," she says.

"We were hoping to finish renovations and be in there by this honey season but we did not quite make it, so we are still working on it and now we have lots of time to have it up and running as soon as we can."

The marketing company is also working on an organic line.

"We are not producing organic honey just because of where we are, but we have found a producer that we think is a really good source, and the people have a lot of pride in their product," she says.

Isabel Wendell says she hopes the business is having an impact, providing an alternative to highly processed foods, which is important to her own family.

"As much as we can, we try to promote that idea there's lots of good food out there, and hopefully, we are just one of the players in that movement back to less processed food."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WENDELL ESTATE HONEY

From top: Busy bees on the job; Tim Wendell checks the hives; Martin Neuhofer faces the *Dragons*; workers extract honey.



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