

Honeybees and lavender fields: Carmel Valley a hive of activity

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Standing close to the hives of some 150,000 bees at Carmel Valley Ranch is a highlight of the ranch's bee experience tours led by apiarist John Russo of Carmel Lavender, but participants first learn a lot about the life of the busy insects and their history at the resort. Photo: Carmel Valley Ranch

Carmel Valley's fields of lavender may put on quite a show this time of year, but look a little more closely at them and you'll see nature's behind-the-scenes stars: thousands of honeybees busily pollinating flowers and fruit trees while filling the larder for queen and colony.

Despite the dire and unfortunately accurate headlines about colony collapses and bee mites, some 150,000 have managed to thrive in hives at the 500-acre [Carmel Valley Ranch](#). The luxurious 139-room resort offers special honey- and lavender-theme weekends throughout July that include an expanded number of "bee experience" tours by apiarist John Russo of Carmel Lavender, whose own fields lie some 15 miles east.

His tours start at the golf club with a delicious glass of honey-lavender lemonade, perhaps to sweeten the sting of signing a liability waiver in the very rare case of a bee sting. Stings happened "only two or three times" among the 2,300 participants last year, according to Russo, who jokes, "Being stung by a bee is not part of the tour. I'd have to charge for it.

That's because the bee dies in the process. "Biologically they cannot use their strongest power for selfish gain — the only rational way to use it is to protect their family or community," he adds.



Beekeeper John Russo planted 7,000 lavender plants at Carmel Valley Ranch in 2010, but their beautiful blooms appeal to more than just bees. Photo: Carmel Valley Ranch



A closeup look at blooming lavender in Carmel Valley Ranch reveals plenty of busy honeybees, predominantly the golden-colored Italian bees favored for their high productivity and calm disposition. The resort's hives also include grayer Karnolian bees (a Slovenian breed) and Russian-Karnolian bees, a hardy hybrid. Photo: Jeanne Cooper, SFGate

other relying on the furry insect to help plants reproduce.

So it's with less fear and more fascination that participants don protective jumpsuits, gloves and straw helmets covered by a veil to go into the inner sanctum: a ring of wooden hives, from one of which Russo will extract a partially filled comb covered with several hundred bees. Peering inside the holes, some filled with glistening gold honey, others with tiny white larval bees, after learning that Carmel Valley Ranch has experienced colony collapse too is like looking into another world a la "Horton Hears a Who!"

But of course the experience ends on a sweet note — a sampling of honeys, some more sweet, some less floral, some darker, depending on the season. They sell out quickly in the gift shop, which splits the harvest 50/50 with the ranch's Lodge Restaurant kitchen, according to Russo. Fortunately, executive chef Tim Wood is offering several hive-to-table lunches this summer as well as occasional specials.

Bee experience tours for guests take place every weekend in July and August, plus a number of Thursdays, Fridays and Mondays. The 10 a.m. tours July 24 and Aug. 14 are open to the public by advance purchase only from the concierge; the cost is \$50 adults, \$35 ages 12 and under. Tim Wood offers lavender-honey infusions culinary workshops and lunches on July 14 and 21 and Aug. 11 and 31; the public may attend on Aug. 11. The base rate is \$120 adults, \$80 ages 12 and under, excluding taxes and tips. Reserve through concierge, 831-620-6427.

Their cooperative nature is just one trait that Russo extols during the 1.5-hour tour, which tends to run longer, given his engaging enthusiasm for the subject. A few feet away from the golf club stand some of the 7,000 lavender plants he planted in 2010, as part of the ranch's "reinvention," and that's where he really gets going.

Pointing to the bees buzzing around the lavender he observes, "We don't have to look at these to know they're girls — this is shopping, and the men don't shop." In this case, they're shopping for pollen, and he points out the pollen baskets behind their

tiny knees. A dance back at the hive will tell other shoppers where to go, Russo explains.

He also makes another memorable distinction between the blockier, larger male drones and the smaller, tapered female worker bees: "The guys have hairy butts and the girls have hairy legs — it's nature's comedy." The stingless drones, whose only job is to mate with the queen, also have bigger eyes, "which didn't make sense to me until someone explained they're 'chick goggles,'" Russo says.

By the time guests on the tour — occasionally open to the public as well as ranch guests — arrive at the hillside hive enclosure, they have a pretty good understanding of the life of the honeybee, as well what threat continuing colony collapses pose to California farmers, among



The bee experience ends with a tasting of honey produced in different seasons, which varies in flavor and color based on the blossoms the bees visit. Participants also receive a small container of hand balm made from Carmel Valley Ranch honey, Carmel Lavender essential oil and locally grown olive oil. Photo: Jeanne Cooper, SFGate



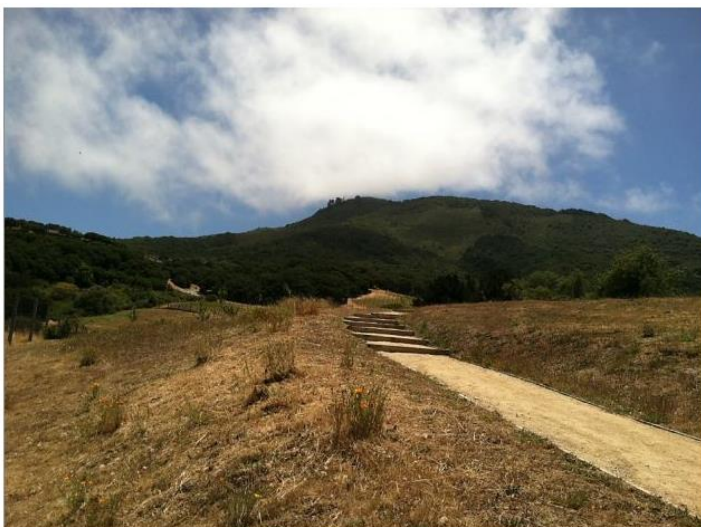
One of the tools of the beekeeper's trade is the smoker, which inspires a defense mechanism that makes them easier to handle. Apiarist John Russo uses peanut shells, which produce a mild smoke. Photo: Jeanne Cooper, SFGate



A screen allows visitors to peer at the hives from outside the enclosure without alarming the bees. Photo: Jeanne Cooper, SFGate



Once participants arrive at the hillside hive enclosure, they don hats to prevent possible stings. Only one participant on the tour has been stung this year, according to beekeeper John Russo, with only "two or three" stings among the 2,300 participants last year. Photo: Jeanne Cooper, SFGate



Honeybees have a 2-mile foraging radius, which includes a lot of the natural areas of sprawling Carmel Valley Ranch, such as this hillside. While the two acres of lavender plants are showy in season, "it's nowhere near the only thing going on here," beekeeper John Russo notes. Photo: Jeanne Cooper, SFGate



One of the first stops on the bee experience tour in the parking lot of Carmel Valley Ranch's newly renovated golf club, amid some of the 7,000 lavender plants now in bloom. Participants have to sign a liability waiver, seen on John Russo's clipboard, after learning of the very low likelihood of being stung. Photo: Jeanne Cooper, SFGate