

# Thomas Honey\_mixdown3

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

honey, bees, beekeeping, beekeepers, hive, jar, business, thomas, seedless watermelon, wax, left, nectar, ifas, buy, beeswax, process, people, granulation, agriculture, product

## SPEAKERS

Kortney Stewart, Michaela Kandzer, Ricky Telg, Mike Thomas

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### Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives revealed the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.

### Michaela Kandzer 00:38

Hi, listeners, this is Michaela Kandzer, communication specialist at the PIE Center. I'm excited for you to listen to and learn from the special podcast guests from Thomas honey as they tell us what it is like to be in the honeybee business. Thomas Honey is based out of Lake City, Florida and has a long standing reputation for quality products. They love their bees and their honey and place value on maintaining the highest quality standards for their pollinators and their products. In this episode, you'll hear from Mike Thomas, who started Thomas honey in the 1960s. And his granddaughter, Kortney Stewart, who now runs the packaging portion of the company. Mike and Kortney share how the company was founded the process of how bees make honey, and then how honey gets into the jars. And they also share what it's like to have three going on four generations of the Thomas family still producing honey today.

### Mike Thomas 01:34

I'm Mike Thomas, and I'm the one that started all of this. Now, my job is making sure that Kortney keeps everything going the way it should be going.

### Kortney Stewart 01:46

I'm Kortney Stewart. And Mike is my grandpa. He started Thomas Honey in the 60s. And so I am now buying the bottling portion of the business and kind of creating a separate entity. We have several family members who still run the bees. But the bottling business has gotten big enough

that it's better if it just kind of runs on its own. So we have started this venture that is kind of new and exciting and nerve wracking because we've never it's never been separate from the bees before. So I am taking that on and clearly with lots of help.

M

Michaela Kandzer 02:25

Well, that's really exciting. And so I know you guys personally and I, I know that you guys have a really rich history with Thomas Honey. So can you tell me a little bit about the history of Thomas Honey, kind of about the bee portion and the honey portion and the bottling portion and the products that you have and kind of what the business looks like today.

K

Kortney Stewart 02:44

I love hearing my grandpa tell how he started the bees. He worked in the post office when he was young. And my favorite part of the story. I'm gonna spoil it and then he can kind of tell you but my favorite part of the story is that his mom did not want him to start beekeeping. She was like you're crazy for leaving a good, solid steady job and to go chase bugs around the woods. And so it may be a personality trait that has been passed down that we were like, well watch me then. So it's been a lot of fun. You know, whenever my great grandma was, in her older years, she was obviously very proud of everything that my grandpa had accomplished. But it started back in the 60s.

M

Mike Thomas 03:26

Well actually I'd started as a part time beekeeper while I was at the post office in 1968 things that were going on in life in general I decided that I would enjoy working the means more than I did work in a job at the post office and the business here and Lake City was a run down really bad and put for sale for a price that I could manage to get together. So I came over here and bought a business that were ready to collapse and we were able to rebuild everything and get it goin. That was in 1968 When I came over here and started full time beekeeping. 1974 started migratory beekeeping, and we went back and forth to North Dakota in the summertimewith the bees until 2002. Then I sold that business to my grandson in law. And then in the last year I've turned the bottle business over to Kortney and sold her and I've sold the physical structure here to my grandson in law from North Dakota and he's going to be a big part of it.

K

Kortney Stewart 04:39

It's really cool. You know, you asked about what the business looks like today. And it's really cool because our family has kind of taken this thing that would have traditionally been pretty much a one man show and diversified it to the point that we can all work collectively within Thomas honey Eat. But it's, you know, I make my own business decisions and my cousin makes his own business decisions. And we are all from the same thing. But it's really neat that at this point, something that started in 1968 has become something that our family is still so involved in, in a million aspects. But it's just evolving, which is cool.

M

**Michaela Kandzer 05:24**

Yeah, that is really cool. And I love a good story. So I appreciate you sharing kind of the history and the story behind Thomas Honey. And I think something that is really cool about this story is kind of the the picture of generational agriculture. And so, you know, beekeeping is a part of and integral to agriculture and how a lot of times it's sad, but in today's times, families are able to support generation after generation like they used to be. And so it's really cool that you guys are able to do that and what a legacy to leave behind, you know, just to kind of like take a step back and kind of explain the process of beekeeping from start to finish. So the bees journey from pollination to the jar, kind of what does that look like and what are all the aspects that really go into beekeeping?

M

**Mike Thomas 06:06**

The bees gather two things out of the flowers, they gather nectar which they've turned into honey and I gather pollen, which is the protein feed that feed the larval stages bees to get them to grow into bees, the nectar that the bees gathered from the flower, the moisture content and it is very high. And bees actually bring that nectar back to the hive and their fan air through the hive and evaporate that moisture down to somewhere below 18%. And then they seal it over with wax. A lot of things that are interested in the beeswax is fat tissue from the bees they make the wax and the wax plan in their abdomen by gorging themselves on honey. Then they build their they build their hives, their cones out of the wax that they secrete. Once they cure that honey down once evaporated, they cover it with a with a layer of wax. Once that is accomplished we take the honey off the bees and we have machinery that helps us along and you saw me by hand you had this big knife that you sliced the stuff off now we have a machine that does that and you take that cap off of the honey and then run it through a centrifuge and and the honey slings out against the wall the center and drains into the tank for the for the storage, the bees layer and as the queen bee lays the egg utilize all the eggs that are in the hive that are fertile, which hatch into the worker bees and they lay the egg it hatches, they feed it through our larval stage and then they seal it over and it metamorphosis into an adult maybe just like a butterfly or a moth or other insect

K

**Kortney Stewart 08:00**

The actual process of beekeeping is so there is so much depth of information that you can never stop learning. It's so much it's so so fascinating. But like he was saying we have the it's called an extracting machine that will pull the honey out of the hives and then we replace the frames and send you know send the bees back out. So once you gather the honey it gets poured into drums stored in a insulated warehouse. And then once we are ready to process it, we will take a drum and usually the honey is granulated once it's in the drums, which is just as natural preservation process. So we have to use a bander to you know, like gradually heat it and then we put it into a tank that will start up and make sure there's no granulation left just for palatability I know it's that I think it's 110, maybe 115 you want you want it to stay under 120 is kind of the level that is preferred after 140 Then you really lose a lot of the health benefits of honey but our goal is really just to get all of the granulation out so you have that really pretty clear smooth palatable product with out destroying any of the natural properties. And then we pour it through a screen that is very minimal straining, it's just going to get rid of like you know little pieces of wax or wood from a frame or whatever. And then bottle it we actually hand bottle everything and label it and package it up and most of our business is

actually from retailers who are wholesale clients so they buy in bulk and then retail our product. And we do have our website and you know you can buy from us directly but most of our business is with other places which is really fun because then you support the beekeepers, the ag workers and whenever you sell to a mom and pop store who's going to retail your product then it's like there's so many small business direct to consumer people in that process that are genuinely helped out. It's just really fun to have the niche that we have is really fun that we can be supportive of so many different aspects.

M

Michaela Kandzer 10:20

Yeah, supporting local from start to finish right. I want to pull something else out that you said in there about the health benefits of honey. So what are those health benefits?

M

Mike Thomas 10:29

The health benefits, we have always had a number of clients that take the honey for the allergy problems and and they testify to me and swear to me that it has a great deal of benefit to them as far as the allergies are concerned. Obviously it does I continue to come out and buy Honey by the gallon. It either really does are they thinking but yeah, the health benefit shirt or the I mentioned while ago about to be bringing the honey and nectar in when the bees bring the nectar into the hive, they have a separate stomach called the honey stomach and they bring that eat the nectar in and in that process. They ingest an enzyme into that honey that literally helped with your digestive process. The honey is digested much easier thats the reason you get the immediate surge for me 90 of energy because it goes pretty rapidly in the bloodstream without being held in your digestive system. The beeswax that is left after the honey process is used in so many things. Everything from lipstick, to lubricant to grease for racecars as a beeswax base.

K

Kortney Stewart 12:00

Honey itself has a lot of antioxidants and trace amounts of vitamins and minerals in it. The bottom line is that honey is an added sugar. So it's a sugar. It's it's a sweetener in it, the nutritional content of it is is going to be sugar related, but it's really cool because of the the proportions of fructose versus glucose in in the molecular structure of the honey means that some diabetics can tolerate that as a sweetener, better. It also is when you talk about the process of bottling and providing honey to people, the minimal amount of processing means that it's a whole food source. So all of that good stuff that goes with the whole food source and the least amount of processing that just removes all of that good for you stuff.

M

Mike Thomas 12:47

Honey has a property, I think it's called hygroscopic. But it means that it will absorb moisture from anything that it comes in contact with. But they use honey, sometimes in critical case cases as an antiseptic, because that property it will absorb the moisture out of the bacteria and killed bacteria and which is kind of you know, funny, because you don't think of it as doing something like that. But

K

Kortney Stewart 13:18

That's a pretty big market for actually I think it's specifically manuka honey for wound care.

M

Mike Thomas 13:24

Be careful with the process and the honey because if you have a container of honey and it is left unsealed, it will absorb moisture out of the air and it will it will sour it will ferment.

M

Michaela Kandzer 13:39

That's really interesting. I didn't know that it's probably revealing too much about me but I also buy Honey by the gallon and keep it even in my kit in my kitchen. So I need to make sure I keep it sealed. But something else that I really like about Thomas honey is something that I you know, noted from your website is that you guys really seem to value sustainability into you know what beekeeping sustainability. So what does that look like in action?

K

Kortney Stewart 14:03

Well, ironically, that is something that was that I kind of I kind of came to the table with that, you know, I wasn't I wasn't involved in the food industry until two years ago at all. I was actually in children's mental health. And whenever I came and like you see the amount of waste is just like mind blowing like, and in the past, there were a lot of restrictions in terms of like health codes and requirements from the health department and what you were allowed to reuse versus not and cleanliness and proper handling is of the utmost importance. You know, you can't you can't sacrifice that. But it's like, but there has to be a better way right? And so I actually met with our health inspector and I call her all the time we have been in talks of how we can like accept and reuse jars. And so I finally have the process ready, I'm actually getting ready to print some punch cards. So if you return a case of jars, you get \$5 off of your purchase coupon thing. But more importantly, we are going to have the opportunity to accept our old jars back and reuse them. And you know that I'm very, very excited about that. And it's been something that's been in the works for a really long time. And we were talking about it the other day. And grandpa was like, yeah, he actually used the, He kind of broke it down. And he said, you know, if you look at the fact that a jar might cost 10 cents to make, but then the jar manufacturer sells it to a broker, and the broker is gonna then sell that jar for 20 cents, and then that jar is gonna get shipped. And now that jar is worth 30 cents. And then once it's shipped to the US, well now the next logistics company is going to deal with it. So now that jar is worth 35 cents. And it just the next thing you know, by the time that jar gets to the shelf of a retailer, something that costs 10 cents to make the consumer is actually paying \$1.10 for it.

M

Michaela Kandzer 16:17

So can you just tell me the importance of beekeepers and the importance of the role that they play in agriculture.

K

**Kortney Stewart 16:23**

I think that beekeepers are important to humans, because they are some of the hardest working people you'll ever meet. In order to be a successful beekeeper, you have to have an incredible work ethic, but also have this really unique balance of attention to detail and patience. So like you have to know what's going on in your hive. And you have to know about the health of the hive and the problems that are showing up and what you're going to do about it and how that's going to respond four weeks down the road, or two months down the road or whenever but also have a feel for the timing of when to when to address it and what's the best way to address it and it's it's just such a cool, there's such a cool kind of person that is attracted to the beekeeping world. And you know, obviously beekeepers are incredibly important to like there's a list of how many crops that wouldn't exist if these were to become extinct like

M

**Mike Thomas 17:21**

Most of the berries, cucumbers, squash, watermelons with a new seedless variety of watermelon, they have to have extreme pollination to get them to cross pollinate. Obviously, you get raw seedless watermelon if you don't have seed. So if you have a seedless variety and seeded variety, and you cross the two branches, then you have seedless watermelon. And so that has to be accomplished by extreme pollination. The watermelon industry, we'll put we'll put bees into the field in large quantities and numbers.

M

**Michaela Kandzer 18:02**

Yeah, that's really fascinating. I didn't realize that about the seedless watermelons. But that makes a lot of sense. So how can our listeners support honeybees in the production of honeybee products?

M

**Mike Thomas 18:12**

They should be aware that if they had the opportunity to plant anything in a yard or any anywhere that would benefit the bees and the insects. Without the bee pollination I don't know that you could produce enough food in the world to feed the world. I truly believe that there's a major crops that are affected by bees would create a serious problem.

K

**Kortney Stewart 18:39**

Yeah, and even stuff like I think just being conscious of the fact that there's you know, there's a ripple effect to everything that you do. And whenever you opt for a perfectly manicured yard or you know, like a bee garden is a popular thing, make your flower beds be friendly and do things that encourage small progress, that you know, it doesn't have to change the world. It just changes your part of it.

M

Michaela Kandzer 19:11

I agree. Yeah. And I really have enjoyed getting to hear your stories. And I could sit and talk all day about about stories and about family. And so thanks for sharing that with us. Can you just let our listeners know where to find you online or where they can buy their own Thomas Honey?

K

Kortney Stewart 19:28

Yeah, so Thomashoney.com is our website we we actually just passed our one year anniversary of the website overhaul. And so it's new ish. And I am learning a lot about how to do that but Thomashoney.com and actually on our website under the Contact tab, there is a page you can go to that says retail locations and it has a search option as well as a map option that'll pull up all of our locations close to you. You can click on the pin and see the business name and address and it also tells you whether there I think the terms we use as a creator or a vendor a creator being you know we have lots of coffee shops and restaurants and people who use our honey in their product versus people who retail our product and then some are both so on that page on the website it actually will tell you who does what so if you see that your close to Bold Bean, you're not gonna be able to buy a jar of Thomas Honey at bold beab but you can get a really great coffee and have Thomas Honey.

M

Michaela Kandzer 20:38

I love that. So just my last question for you guys. Do you guys have any parting thoughts that you want to share with our listeners?

M

Mike Thomas 20:45

I have enjoyed being in the business all my life and and people talk about retiring and enjoying yourself I said well, I don't need to retire do that because I've always enjoyed my work

M

Michaela Kandzer 21:14

We hope that you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you will enjoy some ThomasHoney soon as well. This episode is shared in loving memory of Mr. Mike Thomas, beloved founder and pillar of the Thomas Honey family business, active in the industry until he passed away earlier this year, Mike left a legacy as one of Florida's longest standing beekeepers. We were honored to have both Mike Thomas and Kortney Stewart on Science by the Slice.

R

Ricky Telg 21:48

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