

Bloom and transform

After some months of lock down, my friend Mauro Pizzato, with whom I share a special interest in honey and bees, invited me to meet Massimo Carpintieri; according to him he has the best honey in the region. It was early June, the landscape we drove to get to his *laboratorio*, *Albero della Vita* –and house– was full of blooming trees and busy bees collecting nectar to bring it back to their hives and transform it into honey.

With a glimpse of a serious smile hidden in a white beard, and small genuine eyes Massimo greeted us outside his house. I immediately thought I could adopt him as my *nonno* on this side of the world, so I tried in my best Italian to start a conversation about his work, which he has been doing since 1973.

He shared with us his experience as a beekeeper, a honey sensory expert judge, and as the community leader in Piedmont ¹. One could easily tell by the look on his face, he would have never imagined the two beehives with which he started will lead him to become one of the most important and influential small scale honey producers in Northern Italy.

Immersed in the warm aromas of honey and wax, Massimo showed us around his production *laboratorio*, explaining the whole process of extraction

¹ Massimo Carpintieri is Vice president of the *Osservatorio Nazionale del Miele*, President of the *Associazione Produttori Miele Piemonte* and referent in Slow Food's *Presidio dei Mieli di Alta Montagna*

and jarring, pointing out the importance of low temperatures (less than 40°C) to preserve taste, texture and aromas of each honey varietal. His 47 years of experience are everywhere, he processes every batch with unique care.

A pile of freshly harvested honey boxes attracted my camera's attention, "Allora, take out a honey frame, smell it and guess which bloom it is". –"Va bene, provo!" My brain rapidly started to search on my honey references, and my nose was overwhelmed by the aromas of sweetness and wax, I closed my eyes, blocked my nose and as soon as I released, light floral aromas started to cover my face, I started to feel that I was walking in a lavender field. Not every honey resembles our aromatic memory of the plant as clear as lavender, although subtle it is wonderful to feel. Massimo smiled.

His path as a beekeeper is remarkable, along with Lucia Piana –a very important honey researcher in Bologna–, he has been an active part of the evolution and professionalization of honey in Italy. Massimo's training as a honey sensory expert has not only allowed him to better understand this golden treasure of the hive, but also has given him tools to share, running honey tasting courses for beekeepers in Piemonte.

Italian honeys are known worldwide for their uniqueness in flavours, colors and textures, for their 40 monofloral honeys studied with a multidisciplinary perspective –20 of them are classified and recognized by the Ministry of Agriculture–. This level of specialization started just around the 80's,

with the vision of a Ligurian beekeeper and the knowledge of a French enologist, the first attempt to create a honey vocabulary was born. Massimo assures that when young people join a different sector they bring with them innovation, and this was a life changer for Italian beekeepers and honey experts, who are considered the best in the world today.

For 47 years, Massimo has been part of the evolution of the most influential honey movement in the world; the base of it, he says, is giving the power of knowledge to the producers, the right vocabulary in the mouth of beekeepers has been key to transform the perception of honey in Italy, allowing them to understand the complexity of their harvests in aromas, flavours, colors, and textures.

After his inspiring conversation, Massimo invited us upstairs to his house to drink a coffee, the first thing I spotted was a jar full of light amber and perfectly set honey, which he immediately offered us to taste. Massimo was especially proud of this batch, the first harvest of the year 2020.

To taste honey, he said, first you need to do it with your nose, –where I found fresh and green aromas that reminded me of a rainy day in the forest–; then with the mouth, where the soft crystals of sweetness melted uniformly in my tongue and the aromas of the nose were replicated with a slightly bitter aftertaste. The roundness of this honey, both in flavour and texture, makes it

perfect for a sweet toast in the morning or a savory dressing, and an amazing pairing with a fontal cheese.

Every honey with its unique aromas and flavours, represents a wonderful relationship between bees and flowers; and love and commitment both for taste and environment from the producer. This jar of *Millefiori*, besides the round bitter sweet flavour and hints of freshness in the woods, holds together the contrasts of the Spring I spent in Italy, the aromas of flowers I've never smell before, the warmth of longer days, and moreover the power of change in times of disruption.

Massimo's story inspired me to keep moving forward, to imagine new realities and change in a positive way, to create spaces where knowledge can be exchanged in my community. My perception of the Italian honey movement expanded, realising how fast it has evolved. This visit that was triggered by flavour ended up being one of the most remarkable experiences of my extended year in Italy. Massimo and his wonderful honeys are now a sweet gem in my honey library.