

What's so Special about Raw Honey?

What's raw honey? Isn't honey in itself raw?

It's probably not too difficult to remember well what "raw" means when you associate it with uncooked vegetables and meat whereby any form of heating is avoided so as to preserve all the natural vitamins, enzymes and other nutritional elements.

Raw honey is the concentrated nectar of flowers that comes straight from the extractor; it is the only unheated, pure, unpasteurized, unprocessed honey. An alkaline-forming food, this type of honey contains ingredients similar to those found in fruits, which become alkaline in the digestive system. It doesn't ferment in the stomach and it can be used to counteract acid indigestion. When mixed with ginger and lemon juices, it also relieves nausea and supplies energy. Raw honey is the healthiest choice amongst the various forms of honey as it has the most nutritional value and contains amylase, an enzyme concentrated in flower pollen which helps predigest starchy foods like breads.

Most honeys found in the supermarket are not raw honey but "commercial" honey, which has been heated and filtered so that it looks cleaner and smoother, more appealing on the shelf, and easier to handle and package. When honey is heated, its delicate aromas, yeast and enzymes which are responsible for activating vitamins and minerals in the body system are partially destroyed. Hence, such honey is not as nutritious as raw honey.

Characterised by fine textured crystals, raw honey looks milkier and contains particles and flecks made of bee pollen, honeycomb bits, propolis, and broken bee wing fragments. Raw and unfiltered honey is relatively low in moisture content (14% to 18%) and has a high antioxidant level. It will usually granulate and crystallize to a margarine-like consistency after a month or two. Many people prefer to spread it on bread and waffles, dissolve it in hot coffee or tea, or use it for cooking and baking.

Among manufacturers there exists no uniform code of using the term "raw honey". There are no strict legal requirements for claiming and labelling honey as "raw". You may find raw honey that are unprocessed but slightly warmed to retard granulation for a short period of time and allow light straining and packing into containers for sale. In this case, the honey will not be considered 100% "raw" because it has been heated slightly and therefore rightfully should not be labeled as such by the supplier. Using as little heat as possible is a sign of careful handling.

Forms of honey

Honey comes in a number of physical forms, and understanding the variety will certainly help you pick a more appropriate form from the supermarket when you wish to combine honey with other ingredients used in the preparation of foods. Try out the various forms and tastes of honey when you have the chance!

1. Comb Honey:

It is difficult to find comb honey nowadays, but sometimes you can find a jar of liquid honey to which a piece of cut comb has been added. Before the invention of honey extracting device, honey is mostly produced in the form of comb honey. Today, very little honey is produced as comb honey.

Comb honey is raw pure honey sections taken straight from the hive – honey bees' wax comb with no further handling at all. It is the most unprocessed form in which honey comes -- the bees fill the hexagon shaped wax cells of the comb with honey and cap it with beeswax. You can eat comb honey just like a chewy candy. Because the honey in the comb is untouched and is deemed to be pure, honey presented in this form comes with a relatively higher price tag.

2. Liquid honey:

I easily find this honey everywhere. When I travel abroad, I notice that most countries seem to have no lack of it.

Liquid honey has been filtered to remove fine particles, pollen grains, and air bubbles, and heated to melt visible crystals after being extracted from the honey comb by centrifugal force or gravity.

Because liquid honey mixes easily into a variety of foods, its uses are diverse. It is used as a syrup for pancakes and waffles and in a wide variety of recipes, and it's especially convenient for cooking and baking.

3. Cream honey:

If you are one of those who complain that honey is messy to use, cream honey, which is also known as whipped honey, spun honey, granulated honey, or honey fondant, would be an excellent alternative to liquid honey. As the crystallisation process has been controlled very precisely, cream honey does not drip like liquid honey, has a smooth consistency and can be spread like butter. It has one part finely granulated honey blended with nine parts liquid honey. Crystallisation lightens the color of honey, but does not affect the taste and nutritional goodness at all. For instance, creamed premium lavender honey from the south of France is white in the jar. For those who live in warm climate countries like me, you probably might have noticed that the creamed honey that you buy from the air-conditioned supermart becomes darker in colour and more runny when placed in room temperature.

PS: Honey does not remain stable if the moisture content is too high. No reputable honey supplier would add water to honey, as this would cause the honey to ferment and emit an alcoholic smell.

Color and Flavor of Honey

Color is used in the honey industry as a convenient measure of honey flavour and aroma. Generally, lighter honeys have a milder flavor and darker honeys have a more robust flavor. The color and flavour of honey is largely determined by the floral source of the nectar. However, exposure to heat and storage time may affect honey's quality and color. Normally, the darkening of honey occurs more rapidly when honey is stored at high temperatures. Also, honey appears lighter in color after it has granulated, which is why most creamed honeys are opaque and light in color.