

# Madera farm offers pomegranate honey

Posted at 05:52 PM on Tuesday, Jan. 26, 2010

By Joan Obra / The Fresno Bee

MADERA -- As farmer Jackie Lehman set her pomegranate honey on the table, it was obvious this sweetener was different.

Instead of the light amber hue of, say, clover honey, this had a rich mahogany tinge. And an almond dipped in it revealed an almost caramel-like consistency.

In short, this pomegranate honey lives up to Percy Whatley's description: a dark, viscous honey with a faint pomegranate flavor.

"It's pretty incredible stuff," says Whatley, the executive chef of The Ahwahnee in Yosemite National Park. He prefers to spread the honey on toast or English muffins.

The pomegranate honey -- an unusual, if not unique product -- is the latest offering from Madera farm Home Grown Cellars. Owners Alex and Jackie Lehman have a knack for creating new pomegranate products, as well as maximizing returns from their land with agricultural tourism and diversified crops.

"We are a grass-roots American farm family," Alex Lehman says.

He started with 80 acres of farmland, paid for with money from the GI Bill after the Vietnam War. The couple gradually bought 2,000 acres. After selling off some farmland, they now have about 500 acres.

"Nothing has been handed down to us," Jackie Lehman says.

For about 20 years, Alex Lehman worked as an eighth-grade science teacher. Jackie Lehman was an elementary school teacher for 30 years. Both quit to devote themselves to farming.

This blend of teaching and agricultural experience allows them to thrive in unexpected ways. To see why, take a tour of the farm.

Start in the store, where shelves display jars of pomegranate jelly, vials of pomegranate seed oil, and soaps made with Home Grown's oil, honey and crushed seeds.

Jackie Lehman offers a sample of their flagship product: unadulterated fresh pomegranate juice. It's sweeter than what's typically sold in stores.

Alex Lehman offers hints at why the juice is so sweet. He lets pomegranates sit on the trees until they reach the "late sugar" stage. He designed his own juice press to help prevent the pomegranate's bitter-tasting tannins from mixing with the juice. And the Lehmans sell their juice fresh, instead of cooking it into a concentrate and adding water.

Alex Lehman's science background also influenced the development of Home Grown's pomegranate honey. Bees, he says, gather nectar from flowers and bring it back to their beehive. There, the bees turn nectar into honey through enzymatic reactions and storage methods that let the liquid thicken.

The flavor of the honey is influenced by the type of nectar used by the bees. For example, orange blossom honey primarily is made with nectar from orange blossoms -- which results in a mild citrus flavor.

To create Home Grown's honey, Lehman needed to keep bees away from nectars that would dilute the pomegranate flavor. So he placed the bees in an isolated pomegranate orchard. With the bees at least four miles away from other types of flowers, they concentrated on the field and transferred the pomegranate flavor to the honey.

"There were about 3-4 bees on every flower," Alex Lehman says.

Honey sales in the farm store were strong, prompting the Lehmans to boost production. Last week, The Market at West and Herndon avenues added the honey to their shelves. (It already sells Home Grown's pomegranate juice.)

The honey isn't the only project that's in the works. The Lehmans are adding a butterfly house with species native to California that should open in the fall. It's the first butterfly house in the central San Joaquin Valley, Alex Lehman says.

Like everything else on the Lehmans' property, the butterflies are connected to agriculture. "All insects aid in pollination," he says.

The Lehmans already offer tours on their farm. Groups of at least 10 people can take a ride on the Lehmans' trolley to see the couple's grapes, apples, almonds, pomegranates and walnuts, depending on the season. A standout is the Heartland Bloom Days, when the Lehmans conduct trolley tours of blooming fruit and nut trees.

In the fall, Home Grown opens its pumpkin patch to the public and school tours. The Lehmans lead students around pumpkins, Indian corn and sunflowers. They bring them across the street to the farm store's grounds, where a giant orange tree and an arbor with kiwifruit offer more opportunities to explore.

"The students know him as 'Farmer Alexander,'" Jackie Lehman says of her husband.

All of these attractions are a way for the Lehmans to tell their story. It's a tale of faith in God, pride in American agriculture and hospitality for their guests.

"We just want to encourage people" to learn more about their food, Alex Lehman says. "We want to give back a little bit more than we take."