



# A Taste of Honey

Wittenberg family grows a beekeeping business, naturally.

WRITTEN BY Julie Vitto

No day is typical in the life of a beekeeper.

“Except for Sunday,” says Isaac Barnes ’99, owner of Honeyrun Farm in Williamsport, Ohio. “Usually, that’s a day off.”

On a recent Sunday, he and his wife Jayne Barnes ’03 took their four young children to visit the university’s campus. They had a picnic, walked around and reminisced.

The couple met through Isaac’s sister Becky, who was Jayne’s college roommate. After receiving a degree in geology in 1999, Isaac headed for the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, where he worked at a ski resort for a few years before moving back home to Ohio. Jayne worked at Wittenberg’s community service office until she completed a degree in sociology in 2003, and then spent the next year teaching urban gardening in Columbus. Three months after the two began dating, Jayne noticed Isaac had a healthy appetite for honey and gave him the perfect gift.

“She got me a hive for Christmas,” Isaac says. “Not even, like, a whole beehive. It was just the parts. She had everything individually wrapped. First thing I unwrapped was a hive tool. I thought it was a paint scraper.”

Isaac says he knew nothing about bees, but by the middle of that summer, something “clicked.” His new hobby led to keeping two beehives on the golf course where he worked as a turf manager. Incidentally, the golf course sits on part of 2,000 acres of farmland still owned by Isaac’s family, who were grain farmers.

In 2005, the couple married and moved to Missoula, where Jayne attended the second year of a master’s program in rural sociology at the University of Montana. Isaac put his name in the classifieds of *American Bee Journal* and within three days of the issue’s release, he received a call from a commercial beekeeper with 5,000 hives in Hamilton, an hour south of Missoula. Isaac worked for a year trucking bees from Montana to California until Jayne finished school, and the couple returned to Ohio to start a family, find work and keep up with the bees.

For the next four years, Isaac taught science at Westfall High School while the beekeeping hobby grew to 50 and then 200 hives, enough to turn a profit from sales of honey, soaps and candles at local farmers markets. Earnings went back into the business and the operation continued to grow.

By 2011, the income generated from sales in larger grocery stores, particularly at Whole Foods Market locations in Columbus, matched Isaac’s teaching income. This allowed him to go “full swing” into beekeeping.

“When Whole Foods asked us, it was a no brainer,” Isaac says. “It was getting into the grocery stores that really made us see that it could be a farm and not this little side hobby.”

## BEE STINGS

Today, Honeyrun Farm sells its products in 30 locations throughout the state while keeping 700 hives on 45 bee yards across five different counties in central Ohio. Land is rented for the bees to forage from within his family’s acreage, from willing neighbors, and in areas set aside by the federal Conservation Reserve Program.

Per colony, which consists of a queen, workers and drones, a honey bee population can range between 30,000 and 50,000. Multiply the number of hives by the colony size in each, and it’s safe to estimate Honeyrun Farm currently keeps around 30 million bees.

How many bee stings does this equal? “On a daily basis, about one to five times I’ll be stung just because a bee will climb up through my suit and get me,” Isaac says.

“Last year, I dropped a palate of bees we were moving when the forklift hit a hole in the dark. From about five feet in the air, four hives came crashing down. Everything just shattered. There were bees everywhere. They were all over us, crawling around like ants because they can’t see to fly at night. Lafe, my assistant, was with





me then. He got stung up pretty bad, but I still took about 10 or 20 stings.”

The Barnes family recommends After Bite as the go-to remedy for a sting. The active ingredient, ammonia, acts as a base to neutralize the acid from a sting and helps to relieve pain and reduce swelling.

“Me, I just cuss,” Isaac jokes. “Stinging is way down on the list of things to worry about. You just get your smoker going, you get your suit on and you work the bees. We’re not fair weather beekeepers,” he adds.

“With that many hives, you just have to get out, even if it’s raining. If you’re scheduled to go pull honey, you’ve got to go pull honey. Some days the bees are pretty nasty. But on other days, you could work them with a T-shirt.”

#### PULLING HONEY

The biggest threat to bees at Honeyrun Farm, says Isaac, is not the headline-making epidemic known as colony collapse disorder, in which bees abscond from the hive and disappear, but a little destructor known as the Varroa mite. Varroa are parasitic mites that reproduce in honeybee colonies, spreading a bee-killing disease called varroosis.

Most commercial beekeepers use pesticides to combat mites. Honeyrun Farm has a chemical-free approach, using formic acid, a naturally occurring acid found in some ants, as well as the

organic compound oxalic acid. Isaac says the decision to not use chemical pesticides is based on customer preference as much as it is the safest way for a small-scale beekeeper to make a quality, consumable product.

“It basically knocks the mites down to a level where the bees are not being eaten alive and not catching diseases,” he says.

Between April and November, honey is pulled from the hives in three harvests. As the seasons change, the honey darkens in color and deepens in flavor. Honeysuckle and black locust blossoms are pollinated for the spring harvest that’s pulled in June. The farm’s biggest harvest of the year comes in August, after clover, soybean and thistle are pollinated in the summer. For the fall harvest, honey from goldenrod, and sometimes buckwheat, is pulled in October. In the winter months, there’s hive maintenance, mite treatment and feeding the bees protein as they cluster up and eat to stay warm until the next spring.

Honeyrun Farm keeps several strains of European honeybees that include Italians, Carniolans and Russians. Each strain is selected for its survival rate and eating habits. The farm breeds up to 200 queen bees every year that are used to start smaller hives called “nucs,” short for nucleus colonies. Isaac describes a recent roadside sign he made to advertise the farm’s sale of these starter hives.

“It was a huge arrow with the word ‘nucs’ underneath. There was some interest, like, ‘Are you selling bombs out here or what?’



It didn't occur to me that not everyone knows what a nuc is."

While Isaac labors in the bees, Jayne takes the next step, turning each harvest into specialty honeys, candles and soaps, creating gift boxes and working with customers. Honeyrun Farm now has two full-time employees: one who works the bees with Isaac and one who works in the honey house with Jayne. Having the extra help has allowed Jayne more time to create new products, market them and spend more time with the family. Jayne manages many different operations on the farm and takes care of their four children, two girls and two boys, ages three, five, seven and nine.

"When we started, I was just thinking about taking our products from the hive and turning them into something more exciting for the customers," she explains. "It's really nice now because I'm able to be with our kids and raise our family, but then also do as much work as possible."

#### THE HONEY HOUSE

The farm's honey house sees the extracting, bottling and labeling, as well as production of cold-pressed soaps, beeswax candles and specialty honeys infused with lavender or lemon verbena. Other forms of honey produced at the farm include raw honey comb, chunk honey and granulated honey. More and more, the Barnes kids help out by labeling bottles or counting honey sticks.

"We're doing this as a job now, and it's so wonderful," says Isaac. "I can't believe it's actually working out."

Both Isaac and Jayne grew up on Ohio farms and agree that the experience allowed them to imagine working in a similar way as their parents.

"I like being a small business owner," Jayne says. "I love the freedom and flexibility it gives us, and I like waking up every day and getting to choose what I do."

Isaac, who chronicles the life of a beekeeper in an entertaining and informative blog on the farm's website, says he prefers to work with the bees and is thankful to have a partner that enjoys the more social side of the business. Jayne adds that her background in sociology prepared her for the work she does now, which relies heavily on working with people.

"Having a relationship with people from all different backgrounds is a huge part of what studying sociology gave me," says Jayne. "It helped me to enjoy working with people more and to always be thinking about different ways that people might be interacting with us, with our business and our products. Even with social media."

Reflecting on his experience as a geology major, Isaac says he still has relationships with the classmates and professors that broadened his ability to think on a larger scale.

"It's the generalists that really change the world," he says. "Many schools present themselves as a pipeline into your career. Wittenberg teaches you to think. We were able to make what we love a business because of that."