

Preparation for the honey show: A guide for beginners

by Nigel Coad

In this article I would hope to provide sufficient information to beginners to give them confidence to enter a honey show and feel their entry will be competitive. It is not a definitive guide but I will highlight some of the common faults in preparation and presentation and try and give some tips on how to avoid them. Our bees all make wonderful honey but it is up to us to show it at it's best. Much of the skill in exhibiting is not about the honey itself but how it is prepared.

The judge will be a highly experienced beekeeper and exhibitor whose first task when confronted with rows of gleaming pots will be to get the exhibits down to a shortlist which he will do by eliminating any exhibits which are not in the correct class or conforming to show rules. Only then will he exclude further exhibits for faults and finally if you have made it that far he will open your jar. Your aim should be to get to the stage where the judge will open your jar. By not complying with the rules you will make the judge's task a lot easier by instant disqualification! So your first step is to read the show schedule well in advance and check which classes you will enter.

Honey Classes

I personally take all my exhibits from my normal honey stock but do try and keep back a few jars of a particularly good honey if I am lucky enough to come across it during the course of the year. So if you can try and prepare all your honey as if you are going to show it then your honey will shine on the shelf, your customers will be happy and you will also sell more! Do however keep your show honey somewhere safe or else someone in the house is bound to give it to one of the children for the car boot sale or it will end up on toast whilst you are not looking!

Jars and Lids

Should be of the standard 1lb jars with screw lids. Jars should be clean without honey on the threads. The lids should be clean, undamaged and without honey on the inside. It's best to check jars and lids a few days before the show as the judge will want to smell your honey and the subtle aromas can be lost by a hurried change of lid just before entry.

Filling and Labelling

Take care not to allow foreign matter, wax, bee legs or dog hairs to gain entry. This causes great interest and the appearance of a spider in one entry is fondly remembered! The jars should be well, but not overfilled and the experienced exhibitor will allow a little extra for skimming the top of air bubbles or wax particles, perhaps for more than one show. Under filling of a jar is a major fault and as a rough guide no daylight should be visible below the lid.

The final selection

Should be made about 3 or 4 days before the show. Check jars and lids. Look at honey for clarity. Ideally you should have a bright crystal clear honey. Cloudiness in honey may be due to excess pollen at extraction, or minute air bubbles in a honey which as not been adequately ripened (allowed to settle after extraction), or heated after bottling (60-65C for 1 hour). Finally check for clarity and foreign material with a strong light such as a torch under and through the jar. Multiple fine bubbles can sometimes be cleared by careful heating, but beware of overheating. Minute particles of debris can be extracted with a fine straw. Skim from the surface any excess of bubbles or froth. Clean the threads carefully with a clean cloth and finish with a fresh lid.

Liquid honey

Usually classified as either light, medium, or dark in colour. To ensure the honey is in the correct class the judge will check colour against grading glasses. These are available on the day so if you are not sure which class to put your honey into ask someone to help then your jar can be checked against these standards.

Granulated or Creamed honey

May be two classes, either naturally granulated or so called soft set/creamed honey but more usually combined as a single class. Should be sufficiently well set so that it does not fall out if the jar is inverted! Debris in set honey usually falls to the bottom and is easily seen at the base of the jar. The surface should be clean of froth, excessive bubbles and debris. Frosting, although a natural phenomenon, is unsightly and may well detract from an otherwise good honey. It occurs as the honey contracts during setting and is usually seen around the neck of the jar, particularly in naturally granulated honeys. Some judges do not regard it as a fault. It can be avoided to some extent by using jars that have been slightly warmed. When tasting granulated honeys a judge will also assess the texture of the granulation so if possible always seed your set honey with a fine-grained honey such as oilseed rape.

On the night

Arrive early and complete the entry form. The secretary will give you numbered labels for your jars and other exhibits. The jars unless specified carry no other labels apart from the entry sticker. This is usually fixed to the lower jar about ½-1inch from the bottom. It helps to keep the label straight if you bring a strip of paper glued into a circle that will fit over the jar and act as a guide. Polish the jars and lids with some paper or a clean towel and place on the stand.

Cottager and Novice classes

The Cottager class is for those who have less than five hives and the Novice for those who have never won a first prize in a show. They are both well worth entering for all beginners as there are often few entries so you can be almost guaranteed a prize and you may even go home with a coveted cup.

Section of cut comb honey

May be of stated weight but more usually unspecified. Best presented in an 8oz cut comb container with clear lid. Comb should be evenly filled and capped with clean cappings. Avoid 'travel-stained' brown cappings, wax moth trails and bee debris!

Frame for extraction

Usually exhibited in a special box with glass sides but you could improvise to start with. Pick your best frame as you extract and put it carefully to one side. The frame itself should be cleaned of wax and debris. Members have been known to use a hand held vacuum on this one! It should be capable of being uncapped and extracted, so a winning frame in this category will be evenly drawn out beyond the frame with cappings to the edge of the comb on both sides. The honey itself should be liquid. Once again wax moth should be avoided!

Mead

Mead should be the subject of an article by itself. Takes at least a year to make and longer to mature so start brewing now for next year! Usually classed as dry or sweet mead. Must look bright, and be clean tasting, with no debris or sediment.

Cake of Beeswax

Preparing a perfect 8oz block of beeswax is perhaps the greatest, and most frustrating challenge of the show. Once again whole books have been written on the subject. The real experts use only hand-graded cappings carefully washed in soft water but for most of us you it means starting off with your best wax that should not be too dark.

It will need to be filtered through lint several times. Do not overheat the wax more than about 90C as this will darken the colour. Most people use a Pyrex bowl as a mould which should be polished with a small amount of washing liquid. Pour the measured amount into the container through a sieve and lint. Cover and allow to cool slowly overnight in a previously warmed oven. Tap or float the cake out in the morning to find a small fleck of dirt or imperfection so start again! Wrap perfect cake in polythene bag until show. Treat with exceptional care as damage could result in terminal depression.

The honey cake

This often a keenly competitive class, as the skill is all in the making of the cake. There will be a standard recipe which should be adhered to by the letter and in spirit so there should be no additions or variations in the method although you are welcome to experiment with the quality and make of ingredients, the temperature of the oven and cooking time. The cake should be made as per specification in a 7-inch tin lined with greased paper. The winning entry will be well and evenly risen with a well-cooked but not burnt surface. The mixture should be well cooked throughout with an even distribution of fruit. The cake should have a pleasant taste of honey and spices. It is said to be better to make the cake a few days before and store it in a cake tin to allow the flavours to mature.

Additional information can be found in a series of articles prepared by leading experts for the National Honey show at <http://www.honeyshow.co.uk/support.shtml>

Good luck to you all

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