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Honey Without Pollen is Still Honey

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By Bruce Boynton, CEO, National Honey Board

In the last several months various stories have resulted in misunderstanding and confusion about honey and honey filtration, leading some readers to believe that any honey without pollen is not real honey. This is not true. Honey without pollen is still honey nutritionally and in flavor, and that is why the U.S. Department of Agriculture identifies it as such. This misunderstanding has also led to several class action lawsuits regarding purchases of honey without pollen.

The truth is that honey is made by honey bees from nectar of flowers and plants, not pollen. Pollen grains may end up in the exposed honey in the hive through any number of incidental or accidental ways, but it is not used by honey bees to make honey.

Consumers have varying opinions about their choice of honey type, flavor and origin. There are many different kinds of honey available in the U.S. market, such as honey in the comb, liquid honey that is considered "raw", creamed honey, as well as organic honey. The majority of honey sold at retail in the U.S. every year, and preferred by most consumers, is the clear, golden liquid honey that has been strained or filtered to remove undesirable particles that make honey cloudy. All honey crystallizes eventually; suspended particles (including pollen) and fine air bubbles in honey contribute to faster crystallization. Filtering pollen and other particles out helps delay crystallization, allowing the honey to remain liquid for a much longer period than honey that has not been filtered.

According to the United States Standards, honey can be filtered to remove fine particles, pollen grains, air bubbles and other materials found suspended in the honey¹. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) gives higher grades for honey that has good clarity. Importantly, honey that has been filtered to meet USDA's grading standards may not have pollen, but it is still honey.

News stories have reported on illegal activities such as circumvention of tariffs on imported honey, and there are claims that some dishonest foreign suppliers may be “ultrafiltering” their honey to clean it up or remove the small amounts of pollen grains, often used as a marker to identify the country of origin. Ultrafiltering is not the same as filtering honey. Somewhere during the telling and retelling of these news stories, the term “ultrafiltered” became misused and confused with more traditional filtration methods used in the U.S. honey industry to produce clear, golden honey.

Ultrafiltration, a totally different process, is a specific filtration method used in the food industry for pretreatment and purification. It can filter particles smaller than 1/10 of a micron (a spider web is about 2 microns in diameter). Pollen grains vary in size from about 5 to 200 microns, large enough to be filtered with more common filtration methods.

In contrast to the filtration methods used by many U.S. honey packers to meet USDA grading standards, ultrafiltration is a more complex process that results in a sweetener product. The FDA has said this product should not be labeled as honey, and the National Honey Board supports this position. Some have confused filtration and ultrafiltration, incorrectly applying FDA’s position on ultrafiltered honey to any honey without pollen.

The fact is, honey that has been filtered may not have pollen, but it is still honey by national standards and is preferred by many consumers.

1 For decades, many U.S. honey packers have been filtering raw honey prior to bottling in accordance with USDA’s United States Standards for Grades of Extracted Honey (May 23, 1985). According to section 52-1393 of the Standards, Filtered honey is honey of any type defined in these standards that has been filtered to the extent that all or most of the fine particles, pollen grains, air bubbles, or other materials normally found in suspension, have been removed. Section 52.1394 of the Standards also says that Pollen grains in suspension contribute to the lack of clarity in filtered style.

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