

EAT IRELAND



Recipe Editor Jocelyn Doyle is buzzing about her New Year's resolution

My mother is deathly allergic to wasps (and hence deathly afraid of them), but as a family we've always been inordinately fond of bees. Aside from their cuteness — especially bumble bees, in their fat fuzzy jackets — we were taught as children how they're absolutely central to our ecosystems, our agriculture and our very survival. I'm sure you've heard by now that bee populations worldwide are in serious trouble as a result of modern farming practices, and I fret about this often. That was why I was so delighted to discover Brookfield.

Brookfield Farm in Co. Tipperary was founded in 2011 by previous project manager Ailbhe Gerrard. She envisioned a business based on farming, food and craft while maintaining biodiversity, wildlife sustainability and a strong link with consumers. Today, the farm spans 75

and the bird life has soared due to the wild bird cover and flower meadows. I think the lambs are happier, too; they are certainly more docile, but I don't know if that's because they're organic or because I've learnt how to handle them better!" The Brookfield flock varies between 10 and 25. "I'm really fond of my sheep," says Ailbhe, "they come and ask for their heads to be scratched, and they eat from my hand. They're so calm, I hardly need a pen to manage them." The fattened lambs are processed by a craft butcher, and Ailbhe makes sure they have a happy life up to that point. Because of their lack of stress and their diet of organic grass and lakeshore herbs, the meat is very tender.

Elsewhere on the farm, Ailbhe has 10 beehives of native Irish black bees (recently proven to be a distinct species) and producing high volumes of honey. The black bee is well adapted to the damp Irish climate and can fly through rain, unlike most other species. Ailbhe is keen not to stress the bees at any stage. "We don't take all of the honey in autumn, leaving enough in each hive to overwinter the bees. This is far preferable to replacing the honey with sugar syrup, which doesn't have the same enzymes and trace elements to nourish the bees." She takes a relaxed approach to letting the bees follow their instincts and swarm where they will, saying, "I'm quite

happy to walk in the woods and see a new colony setting up in a hollow tree trunk — this is ancient, natural behaviour." Brookfield isn't only about bees, either, but recognises the wider ecosystem; other pollinators like butterflies, moths, hoverflies and wasps all benefit from the rich, varied surroundings.

I ask Ailbhe how this environment affects the honey. "The Lough Derg

lakeshore, with its gorgeous wildflowers, willows, ivy and whitethorn, helps the bees throughout the seasons. People frequently say that it's the best honey they have ever had." Ailbhe reckons that this is partly due to having a farm with acres available to help support healthy colonies; it's unusual for a beekeeper to have land. "As I'm an active farmer, I can plan my land management to take my bees into account; for instance, we sow 10 acres of flowers every year, which gives a multifloral flavour to the honey." Visitors are welcome at Brookfield and can watch the bees, butterflies, hoverflies and insect-eating birds enjoying an idyllic life on this wild and wonderful landscape.

Brookfield honey is raw: unheated, unpasteurised and unprocessed. As Ailbhe explains, supermarket honey is usually a blend of EU and non-EU honey, which means that it has been imported and blended from multiple sources. It also has to be pasteurised. "It's a pleasure to work with our own honey, which is very lightly processed: all we do is take the frames of honey from the hives and spin them to extract the honey. We filter enough to remove the beeswax, then jar it. The honey is not heated above the natural hive temperature of around 35°C, meaning that the flavour and health benefits are unimpaired."

Brookfield's signature product is their Hiveshare, connecting the farm to its consumers in a tangible way. People who invest in a Hiveshare receive a thank you certificate for helping bees; a giftbox of handmade candles and balms; regular updates about their hive and other farm news; custom honey labels; and, at harvest time, a tasting set including



jars of raw honey from their hive, plus an invitation to the Honey Celebration — a harvest festival with the chance to see their hive and meet Ailbhe. Hiveshare members can also purchase Brookfield honey before it is released to the public. The basic Hiveshare option is called the Bee Friend, with a higher end option, the Bee Champion, also available.

Ailbhe also handcrafts all-natural candles using beeswax from the hives, completing the grand cycle of honey production — sort of the apicultural equivalent of nose-to-tail butchery. "The appeal of the candles is the naturalness of the entire process, from beekeeping to hand crafting. They burn with a beautiful golden light, and don't pollute the indoor atmosphere as paraffin wax does. We probably make the best candles in the world!" This enthusiasm for her life at Brookfield radiates through everything Ailbhe says. "For me, it's really all about looking after the land, looking after the insects and animals. And I love it. I absolutely love it."

Many of my dreams for the future revolve around cultivating my own little patch of nature, and I fully plan on completing beekeeping courses so I can have my own hive. In the meantime, we can all play smaller parts in supporting bee communities. Grow flowers in your garden or on your balcony; avoid chemical pesticides and fertilisers; buy Irish and organic where possible; and consider supporting local beekeeping initiatives like that at Brookfield. Good for the bees, good for the environment, good for you. What better New Year's resolution could there be?

Flip to p.121 to learn about the health benefits of honey.



Honeyed Ricotta toast with citrus and thyme

Makes 8 slices

- 1 pink grapefruit
- 2 blood oranges
- Olive oil
- 1 tsp brown sugar
- 1 tsp thyme leaves
- 250g fresh Ricotta
- 2 tbsp Brookfield honey, plus extra to serve
- 8 slices rye sourdough
- Sea salt, to serve

- 1 Turn on the grill to a high heat. Line a baking tray with parchment paper.
- 2 Slice off the top and bottom of each citrus fruit and place on a chopping board. Use a sharp knife to slice downwards to remove the pith and peel, following the curve of the fruits.
- 3 Arrange the citrus slices on the

- prepared baking tray. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with the sugar. Place under the grill for five minutes until the edges are golden brown. Remove and scatter with the thyme.
- 4 In a bowl, combine the Ricotta with the honey.
- 5 Brush the sourdough with olive oil and toast under the grill for 2-3 minutes. Flip the bread over, spread thickly with the Ricotta mixture and return to the grill for 2-3 minutes until the Ricotta is bubbling.
- 6 Top with the citrus slices and drizzle with extra honey and olive oil. Sprinkle with flaked sea salt, to serve.

Per Serving 219kcal, 6.1g fat (2.1g saturated), 35.5g carbs (10.1g sugars), 6.1g protein, 3.4g fibre, 0.376g sodium

