



# How to uncap a honeycomb

*A labour of love*



He may not be quite as fast as Superman, but don't blink or you might miss Mickael Jauneau uncapping a honeycomb with the latest technology from New Zealand.

In the beekeeping business, "uncapping" refers to removing the wax cap put in place by the bees over honeycomb to effectively hold the honey in place. Without removing that protective wax layer, Mickael can't harvest the sweet honey products his customers at Canoe Cove Honey have come to expect.

Before purchasing the new machinery with the help of funding from the federal and provincial governments under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership (CAP), Mickael explained the job was time consuming and had to be done by hand using a knife.



"What used to take me hours to do in terms of work is now just minutes," he noted.

The frames containing the honey are fed into the uncapper before they are moved to another machine designed to extract the honey. Jauneau, who operates the apiary with his wife Jennifer, explained the machine contracts each side of the frame four times to force out the wax without damaging the combs so the same cells can be reused.

"There is little wax wasted and that makes it easier when you put the frames back in the hives," Mickael said. "The bees don't have to rebuild the comb so the time they would spend building the comb they can now spend collecting nectar and we get the honey quicker."

Mickael got to see the machine firsthand when working on a farm in New Zealand, part of a roundabout journey the couple took to the shores of PEI. A mechanic by training, Mickael is from France, while his wife hails from Vancouver and trained as a human resource professional.

Although they had no way of knowing what the fates held in store, they both quit their jobs and decided to travel. To help pay the bills along the way, they worked on farms, even though neither had any experience in agriculture prior to getting the travel bug.

Their paths crossed working on a pepper farm in Australia. They married in France in 2013, and decided to take a working vacation in New Zealand instead of a honeymoon. That proved to be where bees entered the picture.

The couple were working on a bee farm that also grew asparagus. Mickael and Jennifer arrived to the farm planning to work with asparagus cultivation but just prior to their arrival, a worker that had been looking after the bees left, presenting Mickael an opportunity to help out with the bee side of the operation. Considering that has become his career, many readers may be thinking he took to the challenge like a moth to a flame. You would be wrong.

In fact, he hated it at first but was urged by his wife to stay for a few weeks. Eventually, the work became a labour of love- what he jokingly calls “beekeeper’s disease.” After spending five years splitting their time between France and New Zealand, Mickael said they knew after the birth of their son Thomas in 2017, they were ready to settle down and operate their own beekeeping operation.

In early 2018, the couple spotted an ad in a beekeeping magazine indicating the Canoe Cove operation was for sale. Mickael and his father-in law paid an in-person visit in the middle of an Island winter. He loved the operation and the community immediately but, since it was March, he wasn’t sure what to make of an Island winter. He joked that Jennifer was even less impressed back in New Zealand when he described snow. Keep in mind a cold winter day in New Zealand is seven degrees. The couple decided to forge ahead, arriving in PEI that June.



They began with 200 hives and have now expanded to over 300. Each hive contains up to 70,000 bees. The couple manage the operation without any hired staff so he said labour saving devices like the uncapping machine go a long way to making the operation more efficient.

Since he only needs the machine for about five days a year, he said having programs like CAP to assist with the funding is a really big help to his small family operation. Prior to purchasing the machine, he said it would take most of the day to uncap just three hives so “it is pretty labour intensive”.

“We ordered it just before COVID hit in 2020 so we didn’t really have any major issues in terms of delivery,” Mickael said.

The couple rents out their hives for pollination of blueberries and cranberries in June.

The farm sells two kinds of honey, wildflower and blueberry, as well as 100 percent beeswax candles, soap, skin cream, and lip balm. The skin cream is made from propolis (a resin collected from tree buds by the bees that they then use to repair their hives).

In addition to their roadside stand, they now also sell from a storefront shop, the newest addition to the premises. Their products can also be found at the Charlottetown Farmers Market and online. Since the start of the pandemic, he said more people have been purchasing larger quantities. They sell the honey in various sizes ranging from 150 grams to three kilograms and he said the latter has increased dramatically since COVID arrived on the scene.

He noted one of the most frequently asked questions is what happens to the bees over the winter. The short answer is they are returned to the hive in an area of the farm that provides as much protection as possible. He explained the snow acts as insulation, noting the big issue is controlling the humidity in the hives rather than the cold weather. Bees do not produce any honey over the winter.

Both Mickael and Jennifer believe strongly in teaching both current and potential future customers about where their food comes from. Prior to COVID, they had been holding tours on Sundays throughout the summer for anyone wanting to learn more about beekeeping.

They have also hosted school tours and a summer camp and participated twice in Open Farm Day. As parents themselves, they especially like to see young families visit the farm and they are more than willing to take the time to explain what they do.

