

HONEY IN GASTRONOMY - A NUTRITIONAL AND FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

Honey is a valuable natural ingredient frequently used in gastronomy for both its sensory properties and its health benefits.

This paper highlights the main beneficial effects of honey consumption, such as its antioxidant action and energizing properties, as well as how it is incorporated into various culinary preparations. The uses of honey in traditional and modern recipes are analyzed, where it contributes to improving the taste, texture, and nutritional value of the products. Thus, honey is highlighted not only as a natural sweetener but also as a functional ingredient used in contemporary gastronomy.

Keywords: honey, gastronomy, functional ingredient, dishes

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INTRODUCTION

Honey is a natural food product produced by *Apis mellifera* bees through the processing of floral nectar or other sweet secretions of plant origin. Over time, honey has been used both as a food and as a therapeutic agent, and is mentioned in numerous historical and medical sources. Its current importance is supported by modern studies in fields such as nutrition and biochemistry, which highlight the role of its bioactive compounds. (Machado De-Melo et al, 2018; <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miere>)

In 2023, global production totaled 1,893,800 metric tons, a 0.75% decrease from the previous year, with China being the largest producer, accounting for 24.94% of total global production. Nationally, production totaled 31,541 tons, with Romania having a population of 1,898,000 bee colonies. (https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_%C8%9B%C4%83rilor_produc%C4%83toare_de_miere) The year 2025 proved to be particularly difficult for Romanian beekeeping, with production falling by 70%. (<https://sens-contrasens.ro/2025/09/15/productia-de-miere-in-2025-in-scadere-cu-70/>)

Honey is a natural sweetener with functional properties (antioxidant, antimicrobial, and antiparasitic) (Osés et al, 2017; Sancho et al, 2016) and potential therapeutic properties (anti-inflammatory, antihypertensive, prebiotic, and probiotic effects) (Machado De-Melo et al, 2018).

From both a nutritional and biological perspective, honey can be considered a complex matrix, the quality and composition of which depend largely on the floral source chosen by the bees, climatic conditions, hive humidity, geographical origin, and handling practices during extraction and storage—attributes that are unique and specific to each region. Furthermore, the botanical and geographical origin of honey can be determined due to its high pollen content, which comes from the bees' collection of pollen from various plant species; thus, honey can be used as a biomonitor to identify pollution levels in soil, water, and air. (Zhu et al, 2020; Bonsignore et al, 2024)

The botanical origin of honey guarantees its geographical origin and significantly influences its commercial value (Bridi and Montenegro, 2017; Zammit and Blundell, 2023). Market preference for a particular type of honey can also be influenced by its sensory characteristics, making the definition of various honey parameters important for its marketing. International honey markets have stepped up their efforts to characterize and authenticate the product, as this plays an important role for both consumers and beekeepers. FAO/WHO (2019) established basic parameters for the quality of honey intended for human consumption, which must be taken into account for marketing—these include moisture content, ash content, carbohydrate content, electrical conductivity, hydroxymethylfurfural, and diastase index. (Bonsignore et al, 2024; Zhu et al, 2020)

Beyond its carbohydrate fraction, honey contains a range of minor biologically relevant compounds: enzymes (invertase, diastase, glucose oxidase), organic acids, proteins and peptides, volatile compounds, flavonoids, and phenolic acids. Recent reviews emphasize that it is precisely these minor components that enhance the nutritional benefits of honey; however, these benefits must be interpreted in the context of total dietary sugar intake. (Bonsignore et al, 2024; Lobos et al, 2023; Isidorov et al, 2023)

These parameters, in addition to serving as indicators of quality, also serve as measures of honey freshness and allow for an assessment of processing and storage methods.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In carrying out this study, the authors consulted an extensive bibliography, which includes scientific papers, specialized publications. The methodology used combines classical research methods – documentation, analysis and synthesis of information – with the formulation of conclusions based on the collected data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Honey is used in many desserts, but it also serves as an important ingredient in various savory dishes

Medovik is a traditional dessert popular among the countries of the former Soviet Union, known for its multi-layered structure and the flavor of polyfloral honey. It is also considered a symbol of hospitality and is frequently prepared for holidays and special occasions due to its silky texture. The main ingredients used are honey, sour cream, or condensed milk. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medovik>)

Medovik is a dessert made of baked layers of honey, butter, eggs, sugar, flour, and baking soda, alternated with a delicate cream made from sour cream, whipped cream, and vanilla. The layers are rolled out thinly and baked quickly until golden brown, giving the cake a slightly caramelized flavor. The dessert is left in the refrigerator for 12–24 hours so that the sheets absorb the moisture from the cream and become tender; it can then be served decorated with crumbs from the leftover sheets and ground walnuts. (<https://agris.fao.org/search/en/providers/122323/records/6851755653e52c13fc76b0cc>; https://kaluga.timacad.ru/science/files/7_2/2023/t1.pdf#page=184)

Albinita is a traditional Romanian dessert, often prepared for holidays, consisting of delicate layers of honey-flavored dough and a smooth milk cream. It is made with flour, sugar, eggs, butter, milk, baking soda, and multifloral honey for the layers, and for the filling, a mixture of semolina cooked in milk, butter, powdered sugar, lemon juice, and a generous layer of tart jam (usually plum or apricot). The layers are baked on the bottom of the pan until golden, giving the dessert a distinct honeycomb aroma. The dessert is left to cool under a weight for a day, so that the layers soften from the semolina cream and jam, then it can be served dusted with powdered sugar or glazed with chocolate. (<https://www.lauralaurentiu.ro/retete-culinare/prajituri-torturi/prajitura-cu-miere-de-albine-reteta-pas-cu-pas.html>; <https://jamilacuisine.ro/prajitura-albinita-cu-foi-cu-miere-video/>)

Baklava is an oriental pastry consisting of numerous thin layers of dough and a rich filling. It is also a signature dessert of Ottoman cuisine, prized worldwide for its extremely crispy and syrupy texture. (<https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baclava>)

Baklava is made with very thin sheets of phyllo dough, melted butter, ground walnuts, pistachios, almonds, sugar, wildflower honey, rose or orange water, cinnamon, and cloves, all baked in the oven. The sheets are individually brushed with butter and generously layered over the nuts until the dessert takes on a golden, dense form. (<https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baclava>; <https://www.lauraadamache.ro/2022/01/baclava-turceasca-cu-nuca-si-foi-de-placinta.html>)

The dessert is allowed to rest after being generously soaked in syrup while still hot, then it can be served cut into rhombus or square shapes. (https://www.biblioteca-digitala.ro/reviste/Revista-Hyperion/anul-33-Revista-Hyperion-Botosani-nr-7-8-9_2015.pdf#page=95)

Melomakarona is a Greek pastry made from a tender dough infused with Mediterranean flavors, a Christmas tradition. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melomakarona>)

Melomakarona is a dessert made with flour, semolina, olive oil (or butter), orange juice, orange zest, brandy, cinnamon, cloves, wildflower honey, ground walnuts, and sugar, and baked in the oven. The dough is shaped into small ovals, which are baked until golden brown, then immediately dipped in a cold syrup, intensely flavored with honey. The dessert is left to rest so it can fully absorb the syrup and develop a soft texture, then it can be

served sprinkled with crushed walnuts and cinnamon. (Chu A., 2008; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melomakarono>)

Alfajores de Miel (Peru / Cusco Region) is a traditional dessert popular in the mountainous regions of South America, renowned for its delicate layers and rich filling of artisanal syrup. It is also a symbol of local religious holidays, often prepared by artisanal confectioners in large, circular shapes to be shared with the entire community. The main ingredients are cane honey (or thick honey) and anise. (<https://www.tasteatlas.com/alfajores>)

Alfajores de miel is a dessert consisting of large puff pastry discs made from wheat flour, lard or butter, anise-infused water, and a pinch of salt, layered with a generous amount of "chancaca" or honey boiled until it reaches a soft, syrupy consistency. The sheets are baked until crumbly, giving the cookie an ideal contrast to the chewy center. The cookie is assembled by layering several sheets of dough and honey, then left to set for a few hours to firm up the structure; it can then be served decorated along the edges with shredded coconut or dusted with a very light sprinkling of granulated sugar. (<https://www.peru.travel/gastronomy/en/>)

Loukoumades (Greece). The origins of this dessert date back to antiquity; it was mentioned by the poet Callimachus under the name "gleasme," which was given as a prize to athletes at the Olympic Games. During the Ottoman Empire, the recipe was widely adopted, becoming a symbol of hospitality throughout the Mediterranean region under various local names. (<https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lokma>)

Loukoumades are balls of leavened dough, fried in hot oil, made from flour, yeast, water, and a pinch of salt. After frying, they are generously drizzled with warm honey. They can be served with: ground cinnamon, finely chopped walnuts, toasted sesame seeds, or even vanilla ice cream. It was the Greek diaspora that popularized the modern version, transforming these small doughnuts into a global street food staple. The technique of quick frying and immediate dipping in hot honey syrup ensures a crispy texture on the outside and a light, airy inside. (<https://www.themediterraneandish.com/loukoumades/>)

Chak-Chak (Tatarstan / Russia) is a dish rooted in the nomadic traditions of the Tatars of the Volga River; since the 10th century, it has been considered a symbol of

wealth and family unity. In Tatar khanates, preparing this dessert was a communal ritual: unmarried girls would cut the dough, while older women would fry it and bind it with melted honey.

(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S09246460173470000062>)

Chak-chak is a traditional dessert consisting of small pieces of unleavened dough, fried, made from eggs, flour, salt, and multifloral honey. The honey is boiled until it caramelizes slightly to "bind" the structure. It can be served with: dried fruit, nuts, hot black tea, or decorated with colorful candies. The Tatar population of Crimea and the Kazan region is the one that refined the presentation of this dessert, building impressive pyramids that stay fresh for weeks thanks to the honey's preservative properties. It is an indispensable element at weddings, where the size of the dish reflects the respect shown to the guests. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chak-Chak>)

Struffoli (Italy / Campania region) is a sweet dish made of small balls of fried dough, prepared with flour, eggs, butter, lemon zest, and anise. After frying, the balls are tossed in warm honey and arranged in the shape of a crown or pyramid. It can be served with: candied fruit (cedro), colored sugar beads (diavolilli), orange zest, or almond flakes. (<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Struffoli>)

The use of honey as a binding agent for pastries was introduced to southern Italy by Greek settlers, but it was the nuns of the Neapolitan monasteries who perfected the current recipe. In past centuries, this treat was given to noble families at Christmas as a symbol of good luck and fertility. The people of Napoli transformed Struffoli from a simple monastic dessert into a centerpiece of the festive table, adding spectacular visual elements. Today, the preparation method involves shaping the dough into marble-sized balls, which absorb the aroma of honey in a unique way. (Francesconi J. C., 1995; Ciccardini B., Guida A., 2009)

Pain d'épices (France) is a traditional dessert popular in the regions of Alsace and Burgundy, renowned for its rich aroma and the exclusive use of honey as a natural sweetener. It is also a symbol of Christmas markets, often prepared for the winter months due to its long shelf life and dense texture. The main ingredients are pine honey and a complex blend of Asian spices. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pain_d%27%C3%A9pices)

Pain d'épices is a baked good made with a dense dough consisting of warmed honey, rye flour, eggs, butter, and a mixture of cinnamon, cloves, star anise, nutmeg, and ginger. Unlike regular sponge cake, it contains no yeast, relying instead on the reaction between the acidity of the honey and baking soda to rise gently in an oven preheated to medium heat. The cake is left to rest for at least 24 hours after baking, so that the essential oils from the spices can blend with the sweetness of the honey; it can then be served sliced thinly, plain or spread with salted butter and orange marmalade. (<https://www.lesepicesorient.fr/12/2013/mon-pain-d-epices-parfait-moelleux-parfume/>; <https://liliebakery.fr/recette-pain-depice/>)

Teiglach (Lithuania) is a traditional dessert popular in Ashkenazi communities, known for its golden speckled appearance and sticky texture. It is also a symbol of the New Year (Rosh Hashanah), often prepared to invoke a "sweet" and bountiful year due to the symbolism of honey in Jewish tradition. The main ingredients are multifloral honey and walnuts or hazelnuts. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teiglach>; <https://reformjudaism.org/reform-jewish-life/food-recipes/teiglach>)

Teiglach is a dish made of small dough balls prepared with eggs, flour, and a little oil, which are cooked directly in a thick syrup made from honey and ground ginger. The dough balls swell and caramelize in the boiling syrup, taking on a dark brown hue and a porous interior that retains the sweet liquid. The dish is cooled on an oiled surface until the honey hardens and becomes a glassy glaze, then it can be served shaped into individual mounds or cut into cubes, decorated with sesame seeds or coconut flakes. (Sellick W., 2010; <https://www.jewishfoodsociety.org/recipes/teiglach>)

Chicken or duck with honey-soy glaze is an Asian-inspired dish featuring tender poultry and a thick, sweet-and-salty sauce. It is also a cooking method based on caramelizing sugars, a process that seals the juices inside the meat for a succulent result. (<https://gurmandino.ro/2010/07/03/pui-glazurat-cu-miere-si-mustar/>)

The dish consists of pieces of meat (breast, thighs, or a whole bird), soy sauce, wildflower honey, garlic, fresh ginger, sesame oil, rice vinegar, and sesame seeds, cooked in the oven or in a wok. The honey and soy sauce meld together at high temperatures, creating a glossy, reddish-brown crust. After being removed from the oven, the dish is left to rest for a few minutes to allow the meat fibers to

relax, then it can be served with a side of basmati rice, rice noodles, or stir-fried vegetables. (<https://www.caietulcurete.com/2013/12/rata-la-cuptor-glazurata.html>)

Lamb tagine with prunes and honey (Morocco). This dish has a history stretching back thousands of years and is a classic example of Andalusian-Moroccan cuisine that combines meat with fruit and honey; today, it is prepared in a variety of ways, including with toasted almonds or sesame seeds. The tagine recipe has spread, been reinterpreted, and become known worldwide thanks to the specific clay pot in which it is cooked. The meat must be cooked over low heat until it becomes extremely tender, falling off the bone. (<https://www.mymoroccanfood.com/home/lamb-tagine-with-prunes>)

This dish is based on lamb (or mutton) combined with wildflower honey, prunes, saffron, cinnamon, and ginger, creating a thick, aromatic sauce. It is served hot, straight from the clay pot, garnished with whole roasted almonds and sesame seeds. (<https://www.internationalcuisine.com/moroccan-tagine/>)

Baked Camembert with honey and thyme (France). Recipes for oven-baked cheeses have been passed down from generation to generation in rural regions of France, so today this warm appetizer is served in Parisian bistros and at family dinners alike. This dish has a history rooted in the pastoral traditions of Normandy and is now prepared in a variety of forms, such as versions with walnuts and rosemary or with cranberries. The recipe for baked cheese with honey has been widely shared and reinterpreted; the cheese's texture must be perfectly melted on the inside, remaining creamy beneath the noble mold rind. (<https://www.iledefrancecheese.com/usa/baked-camembert-honey-0>)

This starter is based on a wheel of Camembert cheese filled with acacia honey, sliced garlic cloves, and sprigs of fresh thyme, which is baked until creamy. The cheese is served warm, immediately after being removed from the oven, alongside slices of crusty baguette or saltine crackers. (Simmons M., 2013)

Garlic fermented in honey. This preparation is an ancient preservation method and a popular natural remedy in traditional medicine, used primarily to strengthen the immune system during cold seasons. (https://journals.ekb.eg/article_443065_10927b4da8dd77bf4de228f69592ca4.pdf)

This preparation is based on a single active ingredient, raw garlic, to which polyfloral (unheated) honey has been added, and the transformation process relies on spontaneous lactic fermentation. The honey acts as an osmotic medium, drawing water from the garlic and creating a thin syrup, while the beneficial bacteria in the honey begin to ferment the garlic compounds. It is served added to salad dressings, over roasted meat, or consumed on its own for its medicinal benefits. (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Deepu-Mathew-2/publication/394677980_Standardisation_and_quality_evaluation_of_garlic_fermented_with_dammar_bee_honey_A_functional_fermentation_approach/links/68af3b92ca495d7698304cf7/Standardisation-and-quality-evaluation-of-garlic-fermented-with-dammar-bee-honey-A-functional-fermentation-approach.pdf)

Mead is a beverage made exclusively by fermenting honey. It is a traditional drink of many ancient cultures, from the Dacians to the Vikings, and is considered the oldest alcoholic beverage in the world, often served at feasts or important ceremonies. (<https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hidromel>)

This beverage is based on a mixture of water blended with a generous amount of multifloral honey, and fermentation is carried out using selected yeasts, pollen, or even fruits and aromatic herbs. Honey is not just a sweetener, but serves as the main food source for the yeast, gradually transforming into alcohol and carbon dioxide through natural processes. It is usually served at room temperature or slightly chilled, in a wine glass or a traditional drinking horn. ([https://journal-of-agroalimentary.ro/admin/articole/54374L30_Rinovetz_Alexandru_27\(2\)_2021_203-210.pdf](https://journal-of-agroalimentary.ro/admin/articole/54374L30_Rinovetz_Alexandru_27(2)_2021_203-210.pdf))

Sbitten (Russia) is a traditional winter drink that has been popular in Slavic culture since the 12th century; it is renowned for its therapeutic properties and intense herbal aroma. The main ingredients are linden or wildflower honey and an infusion of spices. (<https://www.thespruceeats.com/russian-sbitten-honey-spice-beverage-recipe-1135657>)

Sbitten is a beverage made with a concentrated syrup of honey boiled with water, mixed with a separate infusion of St. John's wort, sage, ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg. The honey is slowly dissolved until the liquid takes on a dark amber color, giving the drink a consistency similar to that of a light liqueur, but without any alcohol content. The mixture is left to simmer over low heat for 30 minutes so that the flavors balance perfectly, then it can be served hot, strained, and garnished with a slice

of lemon or fresh mint. (<https://bridgetomoscow.com/mors>)

Canelazo (Ecuador / Colombia / Peru) is a traditional hot beverage popular in the highlands of the Andes, renowned for its sweet-spicy flavor and its ability to combat altitude sickness. It is also a symbol of Christmas street festivals and local celebrations (Fiestas de Quito), often prepared in large quantities to be shared with passersby due to its festive nature. The main ingredients are honey (or sugarcane molasses/palm honey) and sour fruit juice. (<https://www.tasteatlas.com/canelazo>)

Canelazo is a drink made with a liquid base of honey, water, and a generous amount of cinnamon sticks, to which "lulo" (naranjilla) or passion fruit juice is added to balance the acidity. The ingredients are simmered together until the natural sugar in the honey blends with the tannins in the cinnamon, giving the mixture a silky texture. The mixture is allowed to simmer briefly to release the citrus aromas, then served hot, typically in a clay mug, with the rim of the cup decorated with brown sugar and a sprinkle of ground cinnamon. (<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=10572489>)

Tej (Ethiopia) is a traditional fermented beverage popular in Africa, renowned for its long history and its flavor profile, which ranges from sweet to bitter. It is also a symbol of Ethiopian identity, often prepared in homes for weddings and religious ceremonies due to its effervescent texture and golden-yellow color. The main ingredients are wild honey and gesho branches (a local shrub). Tej is a beverage made from a mixture of water and honey (in a 1:3 ratio), naturally fermented using gesho leaves and stems, which act as a preservative and flavoring agent similar to hops. The fermentation process converts the sugars in the honey into a liquid with a variable alcohol content, giving the drink a distinct floral aroma. The mixture is left to ferment in special vessels called "berele" for several weeks, until it reaches the desired clarity, and can then be served at room temperature, poured into long-necked glass bottles to preserve its freshness (https://www.academia.edu/84922327/ADDIS_ABA_BA_UNIVERSITY_SCHOOL_OF_GRADUATE_STUDIES_Liquid_Membrane_Extraction_and_Trace_Enrichment_of_Selected_Pesticides_in_Agro-processed_Fruit_Juice_and_Ethiopian_Honey_Wine_Tej_Samples)

CONCLUSIONS

Honey is a valuable natural product characterized by a complex composition and multiple biological properties. Modern studies confirm its beneficial role in health, but also highlight the need for balanced consumption.

Honey is a valuable ingredient in gastronomy, both for its versatility and its nutritional value. Its use goes beyond that of a simple sweetener, helping to enhance the flavor, texture, and functional value of dishes.

First, honey allows for balanced combinations of sweet and savory flavors, making it essential in the preparation of sauces, marinades, and glazes. This ability to intensify flavors makes it indispensable in modern cuisine. Second, its biological properties (antioxidant and antibacterial) support the use of honey as a functional ingredient, offering health benefits to consumers, especially when used in minimally processed foods.

Thus, honey is a complex ingredient that blends tradition with culinary innovation, playing an important role in both classic and contemporary cuisine. When used thoughtfully and appropriately, it can add value to any dish.

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