

# Urban beekeeping generates buzz

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Walking up to the roof of the Fairmont Hotel in Washington, D.C., is not a jaw-dropping experience. Exit the door and you are confronted with a sea of roof tiles and empty space -- there is nothing about this rooftop that really captures the eye. But walk around the corner, and you will discover something that a handful of other D.C. rooftops have in common -- a faint buzzing.

The little house-like structures from which the sound comes are the homes of the Fairmont's 105,000 newest residents -- Italian honeybees that buzz in and out of the three hives: Casa Bella, Casa Blanca and Casa Bianca.

"At this point it's all kind of experimental," said Aron Weber, executive pastry chef and co-chief beekeeper at the Fairmont.

This might be one of the most high profile members of the district's [honeybee](#) community, but these are certainly not the only bees to grace the [city](#) with their buzzing. Other beekeepers, or apiculturists, have been modestly keeping bees within city limits for years, their fear of being discovered slowly dissipating with places like the Fairmont and the South Lawn of the White House jumping on the bandwagon.

And so the secret life of urban beekeepers is not so secret anymore. Beekeepers are, if not shouting, at least proudly standing on the rooftops that house their bee colonies. Washington, D.C., is no exception.

Toni Burnham, an urban beekeeper in the district since April of 2005,

has let her secret slowly seep out with her blog and activity within the community.

"I've not been very good at keeping a secret, that's for sure," Burnham said as she spoke fondly of "her girls," the worker bees who are kept "teenagers for life" by the queen bee.

Burnham estimates that there are around two-dozen beekeepers in the D.C. area (though she says there could be more).

Burnham said most people in the city tend to belong to clubs in the suburbs.

"Washington doesn't have an association, at least until I start one," Burnham said.

And the trend is not limited to the Nation's Capital.

"What I have found is at least here in California, the non-commercial [beekeeper](#) numbers seem to have increased quite a bit," said Dr. Eric Mussen, extension apiculturist at UC Davis.

Mussen said that hobby beekeeping clubs of the San Francisco and San Diego areas are continuing to grow.

Major cities like New York also are a part of the beekeeping trend. The green movement has been taken to a whole new level by urban beekeepers, who, with each rooftop community, help preserve the honeybee population and, in turn, the environment. Plus there's the added benefit of all-natural, hive-grown honey.

In fact, Burnham said, bees raised in the city often are healthier than those raised in the suburbs or in rural areas.

"There seems to be a lot less pesticide use in the city," Burnham said. "A lot of the chemicals they use for mosquito control in the suburbs, they actually kill pollinators. In the city there is more sensitivity to the amount of people and we end up with this funny little respite."

The buzz continues to increase as more and more people become aware of the impact bees have on the environment. The pollination bees provide is a vital aspect of agriculture. Those bees residing on the rooftops not only provide honey, they also help keep plant life healthy and happy.

"In fact there have to be bees in order to keep all those plants -- wild and cultivated -- growing," Mussen said. "They're just intricately involved in wildlife and human food production."

As green initiatives at universities continue to grow, Mussen hopes that will provide some help for apiculture academically.

"I think it's going to help some," Mussen said. "We don't really have a professor of apiculture on the Davis campus, and we used to have three. Hiring new professors into the academic institutions is really going to be an uphill battle."

According to a study conducted at the Bee Research Laboratory in Beltsville, Md., in 2008, there were approximately 3.2 million honeybee colonies kept by beekeepers in the United States.

However, there is still a stigma around bees that makes them unfavorable in the eyes of many city-dwellers, especially those who become neighbors to new colonies.

"There's a lot of fear out there. People react to nature as a strange thing," Burnham said.

In New York City, though some beekeepers prevail, beekeeping is illegal. The New York City Health Code states that no person can "possess, harbor or keep wild animals," which encompasses "all venomous insects, including, but not limited to, bee, hornet and wasp."

Burnham who said she has worried from the beginning that she would run across someone who personally opposes her city bees, has yet to encounter such a person.

But the more publicity beekeeping gets, the easier it is to educate people about the benefits of keeping bees.

"With the arrival of the bees at the White House and the arrival of another year where we lost 30 percent of the bees in the United States, it was just like 'speak now,'" Burnham said.

"A big part of why we're doing it is for the environment and to try to help the bees," the Fairmont's Weber said. "The more healthy colonies out there, the better."

Weber said they hope to use the honey in some of the cuisines and pastries in the Fairmont's restaurant, Juniper.

When asked if she plans to sell her honey, Burnham made it clear she is not quite as public with it. She said she designates 20 percent of her honey for charity, and the rest generally goes to her own personal stash.

"That's not what 'my girls' are for," Burnham said. "I've discovered I'm insanely covetous of my honey."

Much of her motivation for keeping bees is her personal enjoyment.

"There's the amount of time you have to spend with your bees, and

there's the amount of time you want to spend with your bees," Burnham said. "It's insanely entertaining."

As Burnham gushed about her [bees](#), she shared the profound effect keeping them has had on her.

"I walk down the street, I smell more things, I see more things. I watch out for my girls -- I see more critters out in everyday life," Burnham said. "It's completely changed the place where I live. Beware of beekeeping, it does that kind of thing to you."

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