

Oh honey, take my heart!

Daystall Valentine's Gifts: Local Honey and Porcelain Hearts for Sweethearts

By **MARIE ARY**

Sweets to the sweet, they say. But in these days of weight consciousness that box of sweets may not be as welcome as formerly.

Edible and non-caloric sweets available at The Market for Valentine's Day gifting include local honey and porcelain heart-shaped jewelry from among 311 Market farmer and crafter daystalls, where the 98-year-old tradition of "meet the producer" flourishes daily.

Domesticating insects is a honey of a job
Don and Doris Mech, of Mech Apiaries in Maple Valley, offer Market-exclusive honey and sweet-smelling products from the 70 honeybee hives they keep, while artist Kari Dickerson offers a line of hand-shaped, thrice-fired porcelain jewelry.

"Don is the beekeeper and I'm the honey lady," explained Doris Mech, of Mech Apiaries. "This is our 31st year at the Market, where we offer several honey varieties from our 70 hives, including maple honey – which we don't get every year."

Maple honey results when honey bees pollinate maple tree flowers.

"The long clusters of flowers on maple trees appear in this area in early spring, if it's not too

rainy," she said. "A varietal means honey is predominately from one location, not blended from two or three different countries in a vat."

Three different *countries*?

"Honey may be labeled as a United States food even if it contains honey imported from other parts of the world, so check labels carefully," Mech said. "All our honey is predominately from single blossom sources like area maple, fireweed or snowberry that we provide the bees, spring through fall, by trucking the hives overnight to a new source as needed."

In summer, each hive contains "60,000 honey bees that travel about a mile from the hive. That number drops significantly in winter when the honey bees' job is to cluster around the queen bee to keep her alive."

U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics report Washington State apiaries produced 3.24 million pounds of honey valued at nearly \$5 million dollars in 2003.

Hives are monitored year round for predators and to keep them healthy.

"Skunks like to eat bees, so do birds, dragonflies, spiders and many, many other things," she said. "Bear and elk, just because of their large size, can knock hives over, exposing them to the elements."

During winter, snow can block access to and from hives and, year round, wind can blow off hive covers.

Mech Apiaries offers honey from six single-flower and three mixed-wildflower sources starting under \$2 for two-ounce, h o n e y c o m b - shaped jars to \$5 for one pound jars to \$12 for quarts.

" S u m m e r Meadow, a very light honey people really like, is from July meadow blossoms of t r a i l i n g c u c u m b e r s , snowberry bushes, fireweed, white clover and blackberry," she said. "In 2004, it was what we put

into the CSA (Consumer Supported Agriculture) baskets."

For \$15 to \$25, "we offer pre-assembled gift boxes of various Washington State honey, or customers select what they want and have the option of fitting in one of our beeswax candles."

Mech makes 100 percent beeswax candles from the hive honeycomb after honey extraction.

"These retain the lingering aroma of honey," Mech said. "As a rule, our candles burn about one-third longer than paraffin candles and put out no toxins."

Candles are sold as votives, 12-inch tapers, pillars, or molded shapes including hearts with flowers, dogs and cats, chickens and roosters.

"I also have 100 percent beeswax lidded treasure boxes with Swiss Alps flowers or sun and moon motifs that would be perfect containers for an engagement rings this Valentine's Day."

Prices are \$3.50 for the smallest molded candle, \$10 for four votives, \$12 for 12-inch tapers and \$36 for large pillar candles including one with German script.

For readers who want to cook with honey, Mech authored "Joy with Honey," published by St. Martin's Press, with more than 200 recipes. She shares her Carrot Cake and Coconut Cream Cheese Frosting recipes "because, right now, daystall farmers have beautiful root crops for sale, including fresh carrots," she said.

In 1973, Don began beekeeping as a mid-life career change. He was inspired by reading a newspaper story about a beekeeper.

"Don worked at Boeing, climbed mountains, piloted planes and was looking for a career change when he read about a beekeeper who loved his work," Mech said. "He was fascinated by the subject and since the fellow didn't want to retire even after 40 years beekeeping, Don offered to be his muscle and here we are."

The Mechs are a regular Market family; they raised their daughter "right here and she is now a lab technician at Children's Orthopedic Hospital in Seattle."

Taking heart in The Market



Photo/Marie Ary

Heart shapes dominate St. Valentine's Day images as well as the line of Market-exclusive, hand-formed, porcelain jewelry with 14-karat gold accents created by artist Kari Dickerson.

Her heart-shaped earrings and pins, sold individually or in sets, require three kiln firings.

"I hand-form each piece of jewelry from white porcelain clay," Dickerson said. "Each piece is individually cut out from the clay and hand shaped so all are unique, with their own personalities."

She begins the first of three firings that total about 20 hours of work "to set up the bisque, the clay, for the glaze."

After the bisque cools, "I glaze, that is, color, by hand, each piece before the second firing to set the glaze," Dickerson said. "After the glazed pieces cool, I hand paint 14 karat gold on before they are fired for five hours at a lower temperature so the gold adheres to the glaze."

A collector of antique laces, Dickerson occasionally presses lace into some of the pieces to create texture after she cuts and shapes them. That affects the way she glazes them.

"The lace I use to press into the clay is my grandmother's antique lace which nobody else can get, so no one else can create this texture," she said.

The Chinese are credited with creating porcelain around 600 c.e. It is made from white clay based on a mixture of kaolin and feldspar that is fired at temperatures ranging from 1,800 to 23,00 degrees Fahrenheit.

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