

Fresh Cup Reprint

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Over the past year, we've heard a lot about rooibos, the South African "wonder herb" that yields a healthy infusion reminiscent of *Camellia sinensis*. Now there's news that rooibos isn't the only such plant growing along the Cape of South Africa—there's also honeybush, a cousin of rooibos that many say produces an even sweeter, smoother, more nutrient-rich herbal infusion. But for a plant that was first documented in the early 1700s, honeybush has maintained a surprisingly low profile. "It's so versatile," says Reem Rahim, co-founder of Numi Tea in Oakland, California. "It's sweet; it doesn't contain caffeine; it can handle milk; and it's very soothing. But it's sort of a secret. We call it the secret tea of Africa." Fortunately, the secret is getting out.

History

Written records of honeybush date back some 300 years, when it is believed that the Koi and San tribes of South Africa gathered the plant from the wild to partake of its sweet flavor and soothing properties. Every spring and fall, the bush, which grows along the coast of the Eastern and Western Cape and high in the Langlaaf Mountains, would offer natives a brilliant display of bright yellow flowers that smelled like honey, hence the name.

While rooibos has become somewhat of a national drink in South Africa, honeybush has only recently gained recognition in its homeland. Historically, the plant was wild-crafted on a small scale by resourceful farmers who would venture into the mountains to collect as much raw material as they could carry back down the steep terrain. Later, the farmers devised a wire and pulley system to get more honeybush down from the mountains to be cultivated and harvested.

Mentions of the herb throughout the 1800s are scarce, and it only began to reenter the radar screen in the early '90s, when Dr. Hannes De Lange, a researcher at the National Institute at Kirstenbosch, near Cape Town, began to research and promote its properties. Dr. De Lange went on to help establish small commercial plantings of honeybush in the Eastern Cape province, and subsequent research was conducted throughout the '90s, ascertaining that the herb could help everything from indigestion to cancerous tumors.

Until recently, honeybush farming had remained limited and relatively small in scale. In fact, there was no controlling body for honeybush cultivation until 1998, when a group of farmers looking to standardize production formed the South African Honeybush Producers Association (SAHPA). The production of honeybush in South Africa has grown slowly but steadily. In 1997, approximately 30 tons of the plant was processed, and by 2000, figures reached 150 tons.

In the spring of 2001, the first large-scale South African plantation dedicated to the cultivation of honeybush began operating in the town of Haarlem. The farm is the result of a joint partnership between ASNAPP (Agribusiness in Sustainable Natural African Plant Products), Rutgers University and the Herb Research Foundation, and the goal is to create a cooperative farm operated by local growers

who donate their time to plant upwards of 100,000 honeybush plants. The hope is that by cultivating the plant in such a way, growers will be able to control variations in the raw material as the market for honeybush products expands. It will also prevent farmers from having to resort to the laborious and less cost-effective wild-crafting techniques.

Harvesting & Processing

So far, 23 species of honeybush have been identified, but currently, only two varieties are used for commercial production, *Cyclopia intermedia* and *Cyclopia subternata*. In general, the plant is characterized by its woody stems, trifoliate leaves and, when in bloom, dazzling yellow flowers. Honeybush grows in the coastal regions of the Eastern and Western Cape and is harvested during the flowering season, which for the aforementioned varieties is September and October.

Honeybush processing entails five basic steps: harvesting, cutting, fermentation, drying, and sieving. Several harvesting methods are used. Sometimes collectors cut only the plant's young growth using a sickle or pruning shears; other times they cut the bush .33 meters from the ground or even as close to the ground as possible. Cutting the bush back is believed to revive the plant and make for better harvests the following year.

Once the honeybush is harvested, it is chopped up, usually with mechanized cutters. Cutting the leaves facilitates the fermentation process and creates a more uniform leaf size. After cutting, the leaves are ready to be fermented, and a processor might use one of two methods. One technique is called heap fermentation, in which a pile of honeybush with as much as 2.5 tons of raw material is tightly packed together, covered with canvas or Hessian bags, and left to cure or ferment for several days. After three days, the pile is turned and mixed every 12 hours to ensure even fermentation. Once the honeybush turns dark brown in color and develops its trademark sweet aroma, it is spread out on canvas to dry in the sun, generally for one to two days.

The other fermentation method makes use of ovens. Here, the honeybush is placed in Hessian bags and scalded with water to heat it up before fermentation begins. The bags of honeybush are then placed in preheated "baking ovens" and left to ferment for 24 to 36 hours. Again, once the honeybush develops the desirable color and aroma, it is dried. Oven fermentation is believed to deliver a more consistent product, because processors have more control over temperature.

Finally, the tea is sieved into several grades. "Super Grade" is ideal for teabags and known for its superior flavor, aroma and liquor; "Choice Grade" is usually sold in loose form and offers an exceptional liquor, flavor and aroma; and "GG1 Grade" contains coarser material of inconsistent size but is still used in loose form.

Character Profile

In the cup, honeybush is often described as honey-like, apricot, floral, smooth, and, of course, sweet. "One of the

first flavors you get is a honey taste," says Rahim. "It has a full-bodied brew, so it handles milk well; it has slightly spicy undertones; and it's a bit earthy, but not like rooibos. It's not as straw-like as rooibos. Honeybush is much smoother and has an overall sweeter taste."

One of the reasons honeybush is so smooth in the cup is that it contains virtually no tannin, a substance that contributes to a bitterness or astringency in real tea. "You can steep it all day and it will not become bitter," says Renée Hemelka, co-owner of Port Trading Co., a California-based importer of honeybush and rooibos. "It's incredibly smooth." Another factor is that it contains practically no caffeine—approximately 0.01 percent—which some people claim can also contribute to bitter notes.

Honeybush takes well to milk and sugar, but most people prefer to drink it straight. **Jennifer Petersen, who operates Carnelian Rose Tea Company, a tea shop in Vancouver, Wash.,** says that she serves the tea with a slice of orange and a cinnamon stick. She opts for orange over the more traditional lemon slice, because she says the sweetness of the orange complements honeybush more than the tartness of lemon.

For the perfect infusion, Petersen recommends using a paper filter, pouring boiling water over the tea and steeping the infusion for several minutes. "After about three or four minutes, you get a good taste," she says. "You can infuse up to three times and still get a great flavor."

Health Benefits

Like rooibos, honeybush has been garnering attention for its impressive vitamin and mineral content. Not only is it packed with vitamin C, potassium, calcium, and magnesium, but it also contains isoflavones and coumestans, which are believed to help prevent cancerous tumors and osteoporosis. Honeybush's supposed health benefits run the gamut—relieving colic in babies, repairing sun damage, aiding digestion, even stimulating milk production in nursing mothers. A growing number of scientific studies around the world are being conducted on the herb's health properties, and consumer testimonials are quickly emerging.

Petersen says that she gave a sample of honeybush to a customer whose mother was unable to stand because her knees hurt so badly. "After about four days of drinking honeybush, she was able to get up. There was no pain in her knees, no leg cramps and she's sleeping better at night," Petersen says.

But perhaps honeybush is becoming most recognized for its effectiveness in alleviating menopausal symptoms in women, making it popular among today's aging baby boomers. "Baby boomers are paying more attention to what they consume, and honeybush fits into their diets with its naturally sweet flavor and nutrients," says Hemelka.

Rahim says that one of her middle-aged female customers claims that when she drinks honeybush, her hot flashes subside. And Linda Smith, co-owner of Divinitea, a tea company in Schenectady, N.Y., agrees with Hemelka, saying, "There are so many baby boomers trying to figure out what menopause is and how to avoid using drugs to treat it." She adds that in addition to the tea's effectiveness in helping these women, honeybush tastes great. "Face it—we love drinking tea. Why not drink something that's going to help support your system and your age bracket?"

Nira Levy Maslin, co-owner of African Red Tea Imports in Los Angeles, says that she has been overwhelmed by the feedback she has received from her honeybush customers. "People constantly tell me how good they feel when they drink it—physically, emotionally, mentally," she says. "Whatever their comment, they all say it feels good. No medicine can give you this kind of pleasure. That's what makes honeybush so wonderful."

The Outlook

The market for honeybush seems primed for the taking. Baby boomers, health-conscious consumers, people avoiding caffeine, and fans of herbal teas are all potential honeybush drinkers. Smith plans to market the tea primarily to menopausal women. "We've been test-marketing honeybush to see how favorably people would respond," she says. "Women like it because it has vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, isoflavones, and it tastes good."

Petersen says she will be putting much more emphasis on honeybush, introducing at least 20 blends of the tea. She is experimenting with flavor combinations, trying to create blends that are flavorful and still healthy. So far, she says that most customers who have tried honeybush have become instant fans. "At first I gave away samples and said, 'Take this home. If you feel good, come back and buy some,'" she says. "I would say that more than 90 percent of those people have returned to buy more."

Rahim's outlook is equally promising. "As people begin to taste honeybush, they will fall in love with it. And as the health benefits get more publicity, I think more people will try it. If they see results and they like the taste, it will definitely continue to grow."

And Levy Maslin agrees with Rahim's projection, saying that over the next few years, we can expect to see honeybush follow the swift growth pattern of rooibos. The reason, she says, is simple. "You drink and you feel it. That's the bottom line—the flavor and the feeling."

*These statements have not been evaluated by the FDA. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, prevent, or cure any disease.