

Honey Processing: Long & Delicate Work

It's not easy to honey process coffee. In fact, it takes a long time and you have to be very careful. So what's involved with honey processing?

The first thing the farmers do is pick only the ripest cherries from the trees. The beans are then pulped from their outer skin, and as mentioned above, left in a layer of mucilage. This mucilage layer contains a high amount of sucrose (sugar) and acids which is really the key of the honey process.

The next stage is the most intricate and sensitive part of the process: the drying phase. You have to get the timing of this perfect. It's crucial that you don't dry the beans too quickly. If you do, the flavors won't be converted from the mucilage to the bean. It's also crucial that you don't dry the beans too slowly. You need to be quick enough to avoid fermentation within the bean, otherwise you'll end up with moldy coffee.

So how do you reach this balance? Well, once either laid on raised drying beds or concrete slabs, the beans need to be raked or agitated multiple times each hour until they reach the desired moisture percentage. This usually takes between 6-10 hours. After that, the coffee needs to be agitated once a day for a minimum of 6-8 days. It's long, right? Sun-drying honey processed beans takes this long because each night the beans pick up moisture from the air, requiring more drying the next day.

Once the coffee has finally dried, it's ready to be dry milled and roasted just like with the other processes.

Why Is Honey Processing So Wonderful?

When honey processing is so tricky to do right, and so time-consuming, you might wonder: *Is it really worth it?*

The answer: yes, unquestionably yes.

Honey processed coffees generally possess great sweetness and a [balanced acidity](#) with fruity undertones. The flavors are typically less powerful than natural processed coffee, but the clarity and definition of them is much clearer and more pronounced. Who doesn't want that?

The key to this flavor difference is the sugars and acidity in the mucilage. Over the drying period, the sugars in the mucilage become more and more concentrated, and then these sugars begin to soak through to the coffee bean.

Yellow, Red, and Black Honey: What's the Difference?

If you want to buy a honey processed coffee, you'll find yourself presented with a choice: yellow, red, or black. You may also hear these described as a percentage. So what do these actually mean?

Well, farmers will often separate their crop into different categories. Some will have less mucilage, and therefore dry quicker. Others will have more mucilage, and will need a greater drying time. A yellow honey (approx. 25% mucilage) typically has the least cloud/shade cover during drying in order to speed up the drying time, and will gain a yellow color. Red honey (approx. 50% mucilage) takes longer and is typically developed with cloud cover or shading. Black honey (approx. 100% mucilage) is usually covered so as to elongate the drying period.

Yellow, Red, & Black Honey: Which Is Better?

So which is better?

Well, it might seem that black is obviously better. The flavors of a honey process become more intricate and hold more depth relative to the amount of mucilage left on the parchment. The higher the mucilage, the stronger the flavors.

Yet for coffee producers, it has to remain a business decision. Although you may produce much better quality coffee (and be rewarded with a higher price) using the black honey method, the effort, risk and cost factor increase so much that it may be difficult to consider the option. The longer the coffee is dried, the more likely it is to ferment and develop bacterial infections, leading to defects. It also needs to be agitated and cared for far more regularly, and takes up space on the drying beds for up to twice as long, than with yellow honey coffees. Coffee isn't always about producing the highest quality cup; it's about producing what will be the most marketable product for the farmer.

Why Is Honey Called Honey?

The three most popular methods of processing coffee around the world are [natural](#), washed and honey. Natural processed coffees are dried inside the cherry before being hulled and milled. Washed (or [wet](#)) coffees are pulped and then fermented to remove the mucilage layer before being dried and milled. Honey processing bridges the gap between wet and natural coffees; the coffee cherry is pulped and then dried with the mucilage layer still left on the parchment.

The title “honey processed” leads many people to assume honey’s used in the making of the coffee or that the coffee itself resembles honey tasting notes—but in reality, neither is true. This process gets its name from its sticky, honey-like feel the bean has before being dried. Once a coffee bean is separated from its cherry, it’s left covered in a mucilage layer that, when dried, will continue to reabsorb moisture from the air and become sticky.