

Plan Bee

In an attempt to tackle dwindling bee numbers, urban beekeeping has been rapidly on the rise across the world. However, in Copenhagen, one man is going further to show that it's not just bees that can benefit from the practice

Words **Vicky Lane** Photography **Ernst Tobisch**



Oliver Maxwell could be a comic book superhero. For starters, he has the perfect backstory: an English, nerdy anthropologist-turned-social-entrepreneur who, after years working on humanitarian projects in

underdeveloped countries, decided it was time to start helping the rest of the world, beginning with his home city of Copenhagen, where he has lived for the last nine years.

He also has fitting headquarters for the role: a pleasingly chaotic office-factory in the Amager district, where maps with location pins and pictures with scribbled notes cover the walls; big, metal machinery stands in the whitewashed workroom and tiny, unlabelled jars of the resulting amber goo are stacked upon every surface. Then, there's the humming sound that gives the real comic book twist, a reminder that Maxwell – who's been called crazy more

than a few times – lives a life that revolves around...

"Bees," he sighs in agreement, nodding upwards as he sits at his desk to indicate the hundreds flying above him. They're everywhere: crawling along the ceiling, knocking into the walls, buzzing furiously against the window pane. "They've come for their honey," he adds calmly, as though it's perfectly normal to have an office filled with bees.

To be fair, it has been for Maxwell since he started his urban beekeeping social enterprise Bybi in 2010. Meaning 'city bee' in Danish (and pronounced 'boo-bee', he says) the project was a response to a desire to start something that helped bring different sectors together 'in a social way'.

"I've always been fascinated by the way communities work together and especially how business and social organisations can collaborate," Maxwell explains. "I wanted to start something that expanded on that."

Inspiration struck when he spotted an urban beehive while cycling home from a Christmas party in the Danish >



Syrian Aref Haboo has been a beekeeper for Bybi since being granted asylum in Denmark



“I only get stung 10 times a day now”



capital in 2009.

“It occurred to me that the beehive is a perfect example of a community where all members play a part to achieve

an outcome that enriches their environment as much as it takes from it,” Maxwell says. “It’s a synergy I believe we need to learn as human beings, and something I wanted to show was possible to achieve.”

By the time he’d pedalled home, Maxwell – despite having no previous experience of beekeeping whatsoever – had decided to start a socially responsible urban beekeeping company. “You can imagine my wife’s reaction,” he grins. “Yet, it was one of those ideas that seemed so crazy and yet so right that I just knew I had to do it.”

Six months later, he launched Bybi, a social enterprise specialising in the production and retail of top quality, local urban honey that not only promotes natural diversity in Copenhagen, but also helps the city’s residents.

“It’s why I decided to work with social organisations,” says Maxwell. “It’s what makes us different from any other urban beekeeping group out there.”

Most other urban beekeeping groups, which can be found in pretty much every major city across the world – from Brussels, London and Oslo to New York, Kampala and even Marrakech – have been set up in response to the plight of bees. Due to modern farming practices and increased urbanisation, the pollinators, who are responsible for pollinating a third of everything we eat, are under threat, which in turn, is majorly affecting our ecosystem.

However, Maxwell insists that Bybi was always about far more than just saving bees. “While it’s a great by-product and we encourage everyone to plant insect friendly flowers, that was never the purpose of Bybi,” he says. “The whole idea from the start was to create a sustainable honey industry economically and in terms of the opportunities it provided. A system where everyone was connected.”

Working alongside local businesses, who pay Bybi to ‘rent’ their beehives – usually placing them on their rooftops – the project also runs beekeeping courses and educational tours for schools. Significantly, it puts emphasis on involving vulnerable people in the honey production, training up the homeless, mentally ill, long-term unemployed, refugees and retired people to become beekeepers to tend to the sites or, as is the case at some social housing projects in the city, mind their own hives from which Bybi purchases back whatever’s produced to provide them with an income.

One such person is Aref Haboo. The Syrian refugee, who was granted asylum with his family in Denmark two years ago, certainly didn’t expect it to be so easy to land a job that expanded on the rather niche beekeeping career he’d pursued for the last 17 years back home. Now one of Bybi’s full-time beekeepers, he says that life in Copenhagen is good. “The bees here are a lot calmer than Syrian ones,” he smiles. “I only get stung about ten times a day now.” ➔



Clockwise from left: Each Bybi hive has around 30,000 bees; bees store the honey they make in waxy honeycomb cells; delicious Bybi honey; ‘Bee-Man’ Oliver Maxwell takes a break; Bybi has branched out to a different type of nectar; a smoke machine makes harvesting honey less painful; you’ll find Bybi box-hives all over Copenhagen



Where to get the buzz



Noma
Former world number one restaurant Noma often features Bybi bee larvae on their menu, most recently served in a sauce with elderflower. noma.dk



Ruby
This chic cocktail bar uses Bybi honey in drinks like Green Bees, a cocktail also made with Barsol Peruvian pisco, fresh lime juice, thyme and sorrel leaves. rby.dk



Stedsans ØsterGro
You can’t get more local or fresher than the food served at Scandinavia’s first rooftop farm. Bybi honey was an obvious addition to the mix. cleansimplelocal.com

According to Maxwell, the businesses involved – who are also able to buy back honey made at their sites for a reduced price – also love the scheme. “Having a link to a local, social organisation is really important for firms over here and we’re a very concrete demonstration of that,” he explains. “They also get a lot of media attention for it and it’s fun for employees to have their own honey supply.”

Currently, the group has around 20 partners and more than 100 hives – each containing around 30,000 bees – planted across the city. It means that, walking down the streets of the Danish capital, you’re never far from one of the modern, blue and orange Bybi box-hives, which are made from polystyrene. They’re sat on the rooftops of the Copenhagen City Hall, the Carlsberg Brewery, the central Bella Sky Hotel – the biggest congress centre in Scandinavia – and the LO tower, the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions. The boxes are also in the city’s Botanical Gardens, alongside Copenhagen Airport and in a special spot at Tivoli, the city’s famed amusement park.

On top of that, many other businesses, from hotels and restaurants in the city to specialised food shops such as the Fine Foods store in the departures lounge at Copenhagen Airport, have been only too keen to show their support by either selling or using Bybi products, which have expanded from just honey to honeycomb ice cream, honey beer, honey candy, honey muesli and more.

“Honey is like an oil that you can use to create all kinds of things,” says Maxwell. “On top of that, we’ve been making candles out of the wax, while Noma restaurant buys bee larvae from us to use in its dishes.”

Then there’s the honey itself. Harvested three times annually between May to August and processed back at Bybi’s office-factory (hence the bees that often come along with it), the group produced six tonnes this year, a number Maxwell hopes to get up to 25 tonnes soon. What’s more,

they never produce the same batch twice.

“Right there is a honey map of Copenhagen,” says Maxwell, indicating around 35 honey pots stacked on the windowsill that are each glowing a slightly different shade in the sunlight: from a lemony yellow to burnt orange to a reddish auburn. “We make sure we collect the honey in batches because every street in every area has a different taste depending on what the weather was like that week and what flowers are about.”

He’s not kidding. The honey collected from the city’s Botanical Gardens this year is really fruity, a lot like grapes. The Amager batch is minty while honey from the København V district is more classic with a pure taste. “My favourite ever batch was from Vesterbro in 2013,” adds Maxwell. “It was bright red in colour and tasted like raspberries. I’m still dreaming about it.”

Maxwell denies it’s been an easy journey. “Things go wrong all the time and it can be a bit of a circus,” he admits, describing scenarios ranging from buckets of honey being spilt to calls about their bees ‘playing out’. “We once had a situation where a swarm of them decided to sit at the top of the Magic Carpet ride at Tivoli,” he recalls. “It’s not actually dangerous, although understandably some people were a bit anxious so we had to quickly go and collect them.”

Despite the difficulties, however, Maxwell is pleased with how Bybi is working out so far. “We are proving that humans can work together in a way that enriches the environment, improves our lives in general and creates more opportunities for more of us rather than less,” he says. The dream scenario, he adds, would be to expand on the social and environmental projects the group are able to work with in Copenhagen, as well as inspiring similar initiatives to launch across the world that encourage more people to ‘be more bee’, so to speak.

It would seem that this Bee-Man’s work has only just begun. bybi.dk

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“Honey is like an oil you use to create things”



Clockwise from here: Aref Haboo and Oliver Maxwell collect honey on the roof of the LO tower; a handful of bee larvae; shades of sweet success; Haboo maintains one of the Bybi hives



Where to stay

Airbnb

For a home-from-home stay that doesn’t break the bank, check out some of Copenhagen’s Airbnb options. There are many typically stylish Scandi choices, painted in various shades of white and finished with wooden floors, faux-fur throws and feature lighting. Plus, often for the same price as a hotel room, you can get an entire, self-catering apartment, located pretty much wherever you want to be in the city. airbnb.com



FR Faire son miel

À Copenhague, un homme montre que nous gagnerions tous à prendre exemple sur les pollinisatrices

Oliver Maxwell pourrait être un superhéros de comics. Anthropologiste et entrepreneur social « intello », il a décidé il y a six ans de se consacrer à sa ville natale, Copenhague. Dans un bureau-usine agréablement chaotique du quartier d'Amager, le bourdonnement continu ajoute à l'ambiance Marvel et rappelle que la vie de l'Anglais tourne à présent autour...

« Des abeilles, parfaitement, confirme-t-il en désignant les centaines d'apidés qui volent au-dessus de lui. Elles viennent pour leur miel, ajoute-t-il calmement, comme s'il était normal que son bureau soit ainsi envahi. »

À vrai dire, c'est son quotidien depuis qu'il a lancé son entreprise sociale d'apiculture urbaine, Bybi (« abeille de ville » en danois). Depuis 2010, le projet s'inspire de l'organisation des abeilles.

« J'ai compris que la ruche était l'exemple parfait d'une communauté dont tous les membres contribuent à un résultat qui enrichit leur environnement autant qu'il en tire bénéfice. C'est cette synergie que je voulais reproduire. »

Maxwell a donc lancé Bybi, qui se spécialise dans la production de miel urbain local de qualité supérieure. Non seulement le projet promeut la biodiversité à Copenhague mais, fait unique, il implique une collaboration avec des organisations sociales afin d'aider les habitants les plus vulnérables de la ville.

La plupart des autres groupes apicoles urbains, qu'on trouve dans presque toutes les grandes villes du monde, ont pour vocation première de lutter contre l'extinction des abeilles, menacées par les pratiques agricoles modernes et l'urbanisation grandissante.

Cependant, comme le souligne Maxwell, Bybi a toujours visé plus loin que le simple sauvetage des abeilles. Les entreprises locales lui payent la « location » des ruches et le projet s'attache à impliquer les populations vulnérables dans la production de miel, en formant les sans-abri, les réfugiés et d'autres personnes défavorisées à l'apiculture et à l'entretien des sites. Les entreprises peuvent ensuite racheter à prix réduit le miel produit.

Actuellement, le groupe compte 20 partenaires et plus de 100 ruches disséminées à travers la ville : sur les toits de divers édifices, tels que la brasserie Carlsberg et dans le jardin botanique, ainsi qu'à Tivoli, le fameux parc d'attraction de la ville.

De plus, bon nombre de commerces — hôtels, restaurants ou magasins spécialisés comme le Fine Foods de l'aéroport de Copenhague — vendent ou utilisent les produits de Bybi, qui se sont diversifiés pour englober la glace aux rayons de miel, la bière et les bonbons au miel, etc. Le restaurant Noma utilise même les larves achetées chez Bybi dans certains de ses plats.

Si Maxwell reconnaît que ça n'a pas été de tout repos, il se déclare dans l'ensemble satisfait des résultats de Bybi. « L'important avec ces projets, c'est qu'ils montrent que les humains peuvent apprendre des abeilles : qu'ils peuvent collaborer pour enrichir l'environnement et améliorer notre vie à tous. » bybi.dk

NL Bijleren van bijen

Eén man in Kopenhagen toont aan dat bijen ons nog iets kunnen leren

Oliver Maxwell zou een stripheld kunnen zijn. Deze antropoloog en sociaal ondernemer met een hoog nerdgehalte besloot zes jaar geleden om zich volledig in te zetten voor zijn thuisstad Kopenhagen. Hij werkt in een aangenaam chaotisch kantoor/fabrieksgebouw in het Amager-district, te midden van een ononderbroken gezoem. Nee, we zijn niet in een stripboek

beland. Het leven van deze Engelsman draait tegenwoordig om...

"Bijen", vult hij aan terwijl hij naar de honderden bijen boven zijn hoofd kijkt. "Ze komen hun honing halen", voegt hij er nuchter aan toe, alsof een kantoor vol bijen doodnormaal is.

Maar dat is het sinds 2010 ook voor Maxwell, want toen ging zijn sociale onderneming rond bijenteelt Bybi van start. Bybi is Deens voor 'stadsbij' en het project werd geïnspireerd door de bijen zelf.

"Ik beseftte dat een bijenkorf een perfect

voorbeeld is van een gemeenschap waarin alle leden een rol spelen om hun omgeving net zoveel terug te geven als wat ze zelf uit die omgeving halen", zegt Maxwell. "Dat is een synergie die ik wilde reproduceren".

Daarom richtte Maxwell Bybi op, een gespecialiseerd producent van lokale stedelijke honing van topkwaliteit, die niet alleen de natuurlijke diversiteit in Kopenhagen promoot, maar ook exclusief samenwerkt met sociale organisaties om de meest kwetsbare inwoners van de stad te helpen.

De meeste andere stedelijke bijenteeltgroepen, in zowat elke grote stad ter wereld, zijn opgericht als antwoord op de moeilijke situatie van bijen, die bedreigd worden door moderne landbouwmethodes en toenemende verstedelijking.

Bybi is echter veel meer dan een initiatief om bijen te redden, benadrukt Maxwell. Bybi werkt samen met lokale bedrijven, die Bybi betalen om hun bijenkorven te 'huren'. De nadruk wordt gelegd op de betrokkenheid van kwetsbare mensen bij de honingproductie. Daklozen, vluchtelingen en anderen worden opgeleid als imkers om voor de bijen te zorgen. De bedrijven kunnen de honing achteraf terugkopen tegen een lagere prijs.

De groep beschikt momenteel over 20 partners en over de hele stad zijn meer dan 100 bijenkorven geplaatst: op daken als die van de brouwerij van Carlsberg en op de grond in onder andere de Botanische tuinen en in het bekende pretpark Tivoli.

Bovendien zijn er veel andere bedrijven, van hotels en restaurants tot voedingwinkels zoals Fine Foods in de luchthaven van Kopenhagen die Bybi-producten verkopen of gebruiken. Naast honing omvat het gamma tegenwoordig ook honinggraatjes, honingbier, honingsnoep en nog meer. Het restaurant Noma gebruikt zelfs larven van Bybi in sommige gerechten.

Het was zeker niet gemakkelijk om dit te bereiken, maar Maxwell is best tevreden met de resultaten. "Een project als dit bewijst dat mensen iets kunnen leren van bijen: dat ze door samenwerking hun omgeving kunnen verrijken en hun leven in het algemeen kunnen verbeteren."

bybi.dk



Bybi montre au monde les raisons pour lesquelles nous avons tous à apprendre des abeilles

Bybi laat de wereld zien wat we van bijen kunnen leren