



FUNKY produce

It's a still, sunny day up the back of Avatiu Valley. Perfect bee weather. Geoff Matamaki Nati Halston gears up in a beekeeper's suit, boots, and gloves, and preps his smoker. "I'll just give it a couple of whiffs," he says, puffing the smoker around the hive to calm the bees before opening up. "I'm going to check if the frames are okay – I'll work quickly so I don't annoy them." From the bottom brood box, he takes out a frame glistening with hundreds of bees going about their business. "This is the heart of the hive," he says. "This hive is telling me they're doing pretty good. Thank you, ladies." Largely self-taught, Geoff has been beekeeping for a couple of years. He learnt the importance of bees and about their role as nature's super pollinators early on, when

his parents boarded up the fireplace in their house in New Zealand instead of destroying the hive in their chimney. When he found a hive in his home on Rarotonga, he made the same decision. "I didn't want to kill the bees," Geoff says, the bees finding a new home in his first beehive. He now has three, all located in the valley where he plants. Far from noise, lights, and sprayed crops, and with plenty of coconut tree flowers to feed on, it is the ideal environment. "We try to keep this area as wild and as natural as possible," he says. "It's a symbiotic relationship – you give them shelter and food and they pollinate and produce honey." Bees collect nectar from flowers and in the process transfer pollen from flower to flower, pollinating the plant. The nectar, and

some pollen, is taken back into the hive and used to grow the hive and make honey. To keep bees, you need a hive and bees to inhabit your hive, including a queen. You need an understanding of the rules of bee society and knowledge of local conditions. Geoff was one of the first cohort of students when the Cook Islands Tertiary Training Institute (CITTI) started its beekeeping course, Beekeeping Club – introduction to bees, early in 2018. Self-funded, the course is part of community education supported by the Ministry of Education, with Geoff now the lead tutor. "It's about making honey for ourselves and our families... and to increase the number of pollinators," says Sarah Tonorio, a bee enthusiast who worked for CITTI at the time. Participants learnt how to construct



Geoff Matamaki Nati Halston checks his bees. Photos by Matariki Wilson



a hive – the brood boxes at the bottom of the hive where the queen lays her eggs, and the supers on the top from which the honey is harvested. There is also the all important lesson of keeping your hive healthy – how to identify infections which have the potential to impact hives across the country. Keith Mokotupu is the local expert when it comes to honey and led the CITTI course in its early days. His father, Dr Koekoe Mokotupu, was one of the original members of the Apiarist Club, formed in the early 1970s. He went on to establish the Mokotupu family business, Coconut Palm Honey, about 10 years later. Keith learnt the basics of beekeeping from his father, and followed on with a beekeeping course led by New Zealand specialists, through the Ministry of Agriculture in the

1970s. “Suddenly I developed this love affair for the bees. Passion is the key part to the whole journey,” he says. “And to learn – to talk to experts.” He kept bees in Mackay, Australia, in the 1990s, and then two years ago came back to Rarotonga to visit family for a few weeks and never left. He now runs the family business, growing the number of hives and their honey production, and selling their product again at Punanga Nui market. “The taste is incredible,” he says, the distinctive flavour attributed to the coconut flowers the bees source their nectar from. The honey is in high demand from restaurants and as an ingredient in vairākau. Keith describes the work as labour intensive, with 200-250 hives equivalent to a full time job. The pace of the work follows that

of the bees – when the flow is on, meaning the flowers are blooming, the bees are busy growing their hive and it will soon be time to harvest. “For me beekeeping is for everybody,” Keith says, with potential for beekeeping in all the southern group islands, particularly on Mangaia and Atiu with their high population of bees. “We are established here – we have the knowhow to go forward.” Like planting, beekeeping has lessons to teach. “You need to keep a close eye for signs of change in your hive – a sign that something is going on in the hive. And when to harvest. And don’t harvest it all – the bees need food to live on,” Keith says. “It’s amazing how God creates these things.”

 Rachel Smith