

# Join the HIVE

## Local Coach Pollinates Sweet New Business

Article Matt Smithmier | Photography Angela C. Bond

"My goal is to make something delicious. If it's consequently going to be healthy as well, that's great, but really it was just about making something unique."

An economic downturn can sometimes produce creative new ideas and innovations. For 23-year-old Jesse Funk, that idea was honey—not that he knew much about it.

"Aside from putting it on waffles, I didn't have any experience with honey," he says.

A love of cooking and kitchen experimentation led this recent college grad to launch the first of what he hopes to be a whole line of specialty foods. Inspired by what Christopher Elbow had done for the world of gourmet chocolates, Funk has created a line of flavored honey – apple brandy, grapefruit pomegranate, and pear pineapple are just a few – because he didn't see anyone else with the same idea.

Funk is a former all-conference cross country athlete for Winnetonka High School and competed as well at William Jewell College, where he graduated with degrees in both math and psychology. After college, he still wasn't sure what career path was right for him.

"I always wanted to do my own thing," he says.

So aside from a retail job to help pay the bills, he poured his energy into honey. He first tried store-bought varieties, then experimented with juice extracts and alcohol, but in the end simply worked on what flavors sounded good to him. That led him to "raw" honey, or honey that comes almost directly from the comb without any pasteurization, which involves heating the honey prior to bottling. The difference in flavor, he says, is significant.

"It didn't actually even spawn out of a desire to be a part of this whole raw or natural food movement. Having raw honey is mainly about flavor quality. My goal is to make something delicious. If it's consequently going to be healthy as well, that's great, but really it was just about making something unique."

After about five months of research and trials, Funk offered his first bottle for sale at the farmer's market in Merriam, under the brand name Ocarina Honey, named after a type of medieval flute he owns. Funk's goals, however, do not end at small local markets. He immediately went to work on the company website and spends a lot of time with marketing efforts to expand his audience beyond the Kansas City area. His sister helps with the product photos; his girlfriend lends a hand with the bottling, and his grandma helps spread the word. "Nothing's ever a one-man show," he says.

Right now, he is working on raising money to rent space in a commercial kitchen so he can get the product into stores, first here in the area and hopefully beyond. He says that might lead to hiring additional staff to expand the production capacity.

His other interests take a lot of his time as well, however, which makes the flexibility of his honey business very valuable. Not only is he training to become an Olympic triathlete, he also now helps coach cross country at his old stomping grounds, Winnetonka High School. He's finished his first season with the boys and girls teams, and he's looking forward to returning next year.

"I have a passion for the sport, so as long as I'm able to and as long as I have the time, I don't perceive why I wouldn't," he says.

His own training occupies about 12 to 15 hours a week, although he plans to increase that, and he maintains a triathlete blog that tracks his experiences.

That same drive and entrepreneurial spirit keeps him moving forward with the honey business as well, and the satisfaction gained from producing something with his own hands is fulfilling. His repeat customers seem to validate his efforts.



"You have the freedom to set your own schedule, which is something I enjoy particularly because I have a lot of interests," he says. "And it's cool to see people enjoy something that you've created. It's really satisfying in that respect. I think the most often response I get is just, 'Wow!'"

So while he started with little expertise working with what has been called "nature's perfect food," Funk is happy to share his recipes with visitors at the market (many are found online as well) and chat about the flavors he's come up with.

He currently offers five flavors (his favorites are horchata and grapefruit-pomegranate), and he is already working on several new ideas. If his fundraising efforts are successful – he's looking to raise \$5,000 through a Kickstarter.com campaign ending September 14 – he might be expanding the business sooner than later.



"Hopefully it takes off enough that I can be self-employed and be able to move and do my own thing," he says. "I like doing my own thing and kind of being in charge."

For now Funk sells all five flavors online and at the Merriam Farmer's Market. For more information, visit [OcarinaHoney.com](http://OcarinaHoney.com). **AL**

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