

*"I meant what I said, and I said what I meant...
One hundred percent."*

— Dr Seuss, *Horton Hatches the Egg*

Like Dr Seuss, I'm a big fan of General George Patton's admonition to "Say what you mean and mean what you say." To do otherwise creates confusion and ambiguity, and invites misuse of our language to the point of fraud. Open up the newspaper on any given day and some politician – pick one, any one will do -- will provide a well-crafted example of slippery attempts to do otherwise.

In beekeeping, the honest-to-goodness use of our vocabulary is complicated by overlap of our jargon with terms that Normal People (non-beekeepers) use in somewhat different ways. "Swarming" is a common and classic example: Normal People call any aggregation of bee-like creatures a "swarm" but we typically reserve the term for reproductive swarms, with all that implies. Does word choice matter? Should we insist on using our industry-standard terminology when interacting with the public? How about when training other beekeepers to be Bee Ambassadors?

With that in mind, I often come across well-meaning beekeepers who, at harvest time, apparently use the terms "straining" and "filtering" interchangeably, as if they mean the same thing. For Normal People, the two terms may appear synonymous in many ordinary contexts. To help reduce word-confusion, a supplier in the commercial filter industry draws this distinction¹:

*"Metaphorically, straining is a colander for spaghetti noodles, while filtering is the paper filter used for coffee grounds. These questions can determine whether filtering or straining would be a better fit:
What needs to be removed from the product?"*



Hobbyist honey producers typically strain their honey using mesh screens that range from 200 to 600 microns wide. This captures wax bits, Small Hive Beetles and common hive trash but is much too large to remove pollen grains. Photos: Bailey Bee Supply

How large are the particulates in question?"

Fortunately for us in the honey industry, there is no room for ambiguity whatsoever. The definition of "filtering" and "straining" honey is firmly and unequivocally established by Federal Regulation in *United States Standards for Grades of Extracted Honey*²:

§52.1393 Styles.

(a) Filtered. Filtered honey is honey of any type defined in these standards that has been filtered to the extent that all or most of the fine particles, pollen grains, air bubbles, or other materials normally found in suspension, have been removed.

(b) Strained. Strained honey is honey of any type defined in these standards that has been strained to the extent that most of the particles, including comb, propolis, or other defects normally found in honey, have been removed. Grains of pollen, small air bubbles, and very fine particles would not normally be removed.

Hobbyist beekeepers remove bee parts, wax flakes and stray Small Hive Beetles from extracted honey. We typically use mesh strainers that are either 200 (fine), 400 (medium) or 600 (coarse) microns, meaning

¹ https://www.csidesigns.com/blog/articles/whats-the-difference-between-filters-and-strainers?srltid=AfmBOoqTb_p3u-L15M2gA9CsG7CVf5oA_1ql_im5wLnhtUGLu1KuKZBG

² "United States Standards for Grades of Extracted Honey", United States Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service, May 23, 1985, https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/Extracted_Honey_Standard%5B1%5D.pdf

anything larger than that number cannot pass through the mesh.

Anyone who has much experience harvesting their own honey knows that the smaller the strainer medium, the slower honey will move through it. That's why I don't usually strain my honey at the 200-micron level unless it is going to a State Fair competition. Warming honey will enable it to pass more freely through a strainer but its quality will suffer if warmed too much or for too long.

Note that pollen grains range from 10 to 100 microns in diameter with an average of about 25 microns. So, it is impossible for hobbyist strainers to remove pollen from honey, warmed or otherwise.

Bottom line: by Federal Law, what most hobbyists do is called "straining".

What if we want to remove more than relatively large particles? Dust can cloud honey, making it less visually appealing than if it were crystal-clear. And tiny sugar crystals will tend to cause crystallization if they aren't either melted or removed, thereby reducing the shelf-life of the product. (See "[Crunchy Honey: Why Honey Granulates and What to Do About It](#)" for details.) Removing all dust and sugar crystals requires high-tech filtration (for example, blending the honey with diatomaceous earth and pressing through a filter) and is done by large-scale honey packers.

Even more commercially important is that identification of the pollen that naturally is included with honey can pinpoint Country of Origin; removing the pollen renders honey generic with respect to exactly where it was produced. That allows, for example, China (by far the world's largest producer of honey) to attempt to avoid US Customs regulations by trans-shipping huge quantities indirectly through Vietnam, changing the origin label on the containers from "China" to "Vietnam". This

practice has been going on for well over two decades.

The label on a Food Lion jar of honey I recently purchased states that it was "filtered to remove pollen and impurities" and also states, "Product of India Vietnam Mexico Ukraine" ... or China? Or who else? How much of it is even real honey? We don't know, thanks to filtration.

What about nasty stuff at the molecular level? This is where ultra-filtration is useful. In the international honey market, some countries such as China have been known to apply unauthorized antibiotics to honey bee colonies which then make their way into the honey, rendering it illegal for sale in the United States. Ultrafiltration can remove such impurities. Honey can be passed through extremely fine filters if it is blended with water, forced with high pressure through a microscopically-small filter and then dehydrated to return it to honey-appropriate viscosity. This removes not only pollen but also antibiotics and even the honey's color!

What do you do with your honey? Strain it or filter it? Words carry nuances of meaning and words matter. Let's fully separate ourselves from the controversy over industrial filtration and ultra-filtration by describing what we hobbyists do as "straining", removing any chance of confusion about the mechanics of the process or the quality of the result. Not only is it a matter of speaking clearly, it is Federal law.

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