



By Rachel Clemons

What's the buzz about honey?

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Honey has received some bad press lately. If we're to believe what's being reported, imported honey full of dangerous contaminants is being passed off as Australian and sold to unsuspecting consumers. Many of these accusations are being directed at Capilano, the leading brand of honey in Australia.

Chances are you have a jar of honey in your pantry – so should you be worried?

We look at the key questions being raised about honey safety, origin and quality to see if they stand up to scrutiny.

In this article:

- [Does Capilano use imported honey containing harmful antibiotics in its products?](#)
- [Is Capilano concealing the country of origin of its honey from consumers?](#)
- [Does some honey contain dangerous levels of plant toxins?](#)
- [Is honey adulteration an issue?](#)
- [Further reading](#)

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Does Capilano use imported honey containing harmful antibiotics in its products?

Certainly the safety of honey produced overseas has been called into question in the past. In 2002, Britain, the European Union and the United States banned all honey imports from China when samples of its honey were found to be contaminated with the antibiotic chloramphenicol, which can lead to life-threatening anaemia. The following year Fairfax media reported on overseas testing which found Argentinian honey to be contaminated with nitrofurans, another antibiotic banned for use in food-producing animals in most countries because of a possible risk of cancer in people who eat it over long periods.

Given that some Australian producers import honey from overseas to supplement supply during times of domestic shortage, these reports gave cause for concern.

But Australian laws require that imported honey meets the same safety standards as locally produced honey. It must comply with both the *Biosecurity Act 2015* and the *Imported Food Control Act 1992*, and not pose a risk to human health.

Ben McKee, Capilano managing director, told us: "All imported honey is comprehensively tested and undergoes rigorous quality assurance testing to ensure it meets the quality standards set in place by the Australian Quarantine and Inspective Service (AQIS) and Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ). Capilano is proud to say that it has never failed this quality testing."

In response to CHOICE's questions about the monitoring of imported honey, the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources responded that under the Imported Food Inspection Scheme, imported honey is subject to surveillance inspection at the rate of five percent of consignments; however, this rate increases to 100% if the imported product fails inspection.

"Until late 2015, samples of imported honey were tested for antibiotics; however, due to high levels of compliance over the past ten years this testing ceased," it advised.

Is Capilano concealing the country of origin of its honey from consumers?



Current labelling on Capilano honey indicates it's 100% Australian

Capilano sells honey under a number of brands, and McKee tells us the origin of the honey in each does differ.

"All Capilano-branded honey sold in Australia is 100% Australian honey, supplied by more than 600 beekeeping families across Australia. Wescobee is also 100% Australian honey and packed primarily for WA consumers. Our antimicrobial Manuka and Jarrah honeys, which are part of the Barnes Naturals range, are also 100% Australian honey," he says.

Capilano also sells honey under brands Allowrie, Barnes (sold only in Victoria) and Smiths (sold only in Western Australia). According to McKee, these brands of honey may contain imported honey from accredited suppliers in Argentina, Mexico and China "to present a value-driven alternative to consumers and to supplement Australian honey during periods of low supply".



Current labelling on Allowrie honey leaves consumers in the dark as to the origin of overseas ingredients

"In compliance with legal requirements, any products blended with imported honey are clearly labelled to ensure customers are informed. In accordance with new labelling laws, Capilano is in the process of updating its packaging to include the required information as specified under the country of origin food labelling reforms," McKee says.

Under these new laws, products like this blended honey will need to display a bar chart showing the percentage of Australian ingredients. But although food manufacturers are encouraged to identify the country of origin of any imported ingredients, it's not mandatory for them to do so.

So that consumers can make an informed purchasing decision, CHOICE would like to see Capilano – along with all food manufacturers – be transparent and take on board the option to list the origin of the key ingredients of their products.

Does some honey contain dangerous levels of plant toxins?

Another concern doing the rounds is the presence in honey of pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs) – naturally occurring plant toxins that may cause damage to the liver.

Some honeys contain high levels of PAs if bees forage from particular flowers (Paterson's Curse, for example, aka Salvation Jane) but these honeys are relatively uncommon. And according to FSANZ, "based on the type of PA present and honey consumption levels in Australia and New Zealand, they are unlikely to pose a health risk".

In a statement released on this issue, FSANZ advises: "For people who normally eat honey derived from flowers other than Paterson's Curse, the levels of pyrrolizidine alkaloids would not be a cause for concern."

But it adds: "It is recommended that anyone, including pregnant or breastfeeding women, who consumes more than two tablespoons of honey a day, doesn't eat Paterson's Curse honey exclusively."

An international risk assessment of PAs by JECFA (the WHO expert group with responsibility for assessing food contaminants) is currently underway, and a FSANZ spokesperson tells us it "is still waiting on the outcome".

Is honey adulteration an issue?

Compliance with safety standards may be good, but more recently it's adulteration that's causing concern in the honey industry.

In late 2014 a food importer paid a \$10,200 penalty after the ACCC pulled it up for selling a product called Hi Honey with a map of Australia on its label, when the product was largely composed of plant sugars produced in Turkey.

Concerns about artificial honey being labelled and sold as honey were sufficiently great that in October 2015 the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources started testing imported honey samples for evidence of substitution with C4 sugars (sugar cane or corn syrup) to ensure honey entering Australia is compliant with the honey standard in the food standards code.

Capilano tells CHOICE it has never failed this quality testing.