

THE ROOF IN NUMBERS

14 hives on the roof

23 m above the street

380 kg of honey in the July harvest

3 km flying radius, give or take

CITY

The bees on the roof

For thirty years Carmen Aldaba set books by hand on the second floor of a printing works. When the works closed, she went up to the roof. She now keeps fourteen hives there, and half a million bees that work the lime trees of half the city.

WORDS: LUCÍA FERRÁN

AT HALF PAST six in the morning the roof still holds the cold of the night. Carmen Aldaba climbs the iron stairs with a lit smoker in one hand and a box of empty frames in the other, and she does not switch on her torch: she knows all twenty-two steps by heart. At the top, in a row on the gravel, stand fourteen wooden boxes painted green, ochre and blue, each with a letter chalked on its lid.

“A is the fierce one,” she says, levering up a lid. “M is the hard worker. The rest come and go.”

For thirty years Aldaba worked two floors below, in the composing room of Gráficas Lezcano, a family printer that turned out hardware catalogues, festival programmes, books of poems paid for by their poets and, for a long stretch, the timetables of the city buses. She started as an apprentice at seventeen, when type was still set by hand from cases of lead, and left in 2011, on the day the family sold the presses to a scrap dealer from Calatayud. The building passed to a cooperative of workshops. Today it houses a luthier, two design studios, a pottery school and a bakery that fires its ovens before dawn in the old paper store.

A ROOF NOBODY WANTED

Nobody had a use for the roof. It leaked, its railing had rusted, and the chimney of the old boiler still stood there because the cooperative did not dare pull it down. At a members’ meeting Aldaba proposed two hives “to see how it goes”, and the meeting said yes on one condition: that nobody from the workshops would ever have to go near them. That was the spring of 2013. The two hives are now fourteen, and the roof’s honey is sold in the bakery, in quarter-kilo jars with a label she sets herself on the old treadle platen press that stayed behind in the yard.

She learned the craft from her grandfather, who kept bees in cork and straw hives in a village in Teruel. One of those woven straw skeps, with its arched doorway at the foot, now sits empty in a corner of the roof on a concrete block. She does not use it: modern hives open from the top and can be checked frame by frame, while the only way to empty a skep is to break the combs. But she

brought it back from the village when the house was sold, and she would not leave it in a storeroom.

WHAT CITY BEES EAT

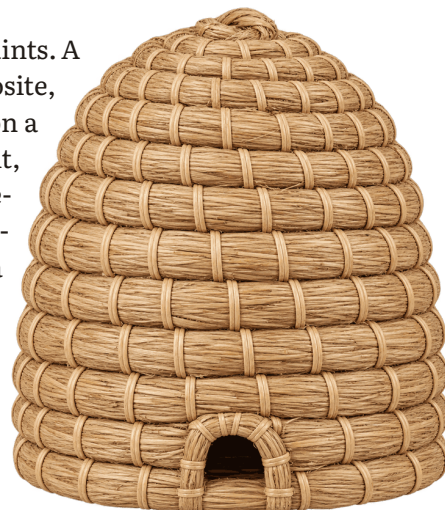
The question she hears most is how bees live in the middle of all that tarmac. The answer is in the streets. A worker bee flies three kilometres from its hive without much effort, and within a circle that size around the printing works there are thousands of street trees: limes, white-flowered locusts, pagoda trees, hackberries, and plane trees that give no nectar but plenty of resin. There are parks with rosemary and lavender, empty lots full of wild rocket, and hundreds of balconies with geraniums, basil and tomato plants.

“In the country a hive depends on what gets sown that year,” she explains. “If your neighbour plants sunflowers, you get sunflower. Here there is a bit of everything, and something is in flower nearly every month.”

That is why the honey from the roof changes colour through the year. June’s, when the limes flower, is pale and smells of mint. Late summer’s, after the pagoda trees, is dark amber and a little bitter. Aldaba does not blend them: each harvest goes into its own jars, with the date and the name of the tree most in flower in those weeks. In July she took off three hundred and eighty kilos, her best year since she started.

THE NEIGHBOURS

At first there were complaints. A woman in the block opposite, who hangs her washing on a terrace at the same height, wrote to the council because the bees were landing on her sheets. Aldaba went round with a jar of honey and a proposal: to turn the hive entrances so that the bees flew out over the inner courtyard instead of towards her ter-



Continued

“A hive is like a case of type: if you know where everything is, you don’t have to look.”

every autumn.

The worst scare came one morning in May 2024. A hive swarmed, as strong colonies do in spring: the old queen left with half the workers to look for a new home, and the swarm, a ball of some fifteen thousand bees, hung itself from the shelter of a bus stop two streets away. Someone called the fire brigade, the fire brigade called the local police, and the local police, who already had her number, called Aldaba. She was there in ten minutes with a cardboard box and a sheet, shook the cluster into the box and carried it back up to the roof.

“A swarm won’t sting you. The bees are full of honey and have nothing to defend,” she says. “Of course, the people waiting for the bus don’t know that.”

HEAT AND THE MITE

A roof is a hard place for a hive. In August the gravel passes fifty degrees and the wood of the boxes heats up like an iron. Bees cool the hive by carrying water and fanning it with their wings, and a large colony can get through more than a litre a day. Aldaba leaves them drinking trays with floating cork and has strung a shade net over the row of boxes, tied to the chimney and the railing. In summer she goes up twice a day, at dawn and at dusk, never at midday.

The other enemy is varroa, a mite from Asia that feeds on the larvae and spreads viruses. No hive in Europe is free of it. Aldaba counts the mites that drop onto a tray under each box and treats with oxalic acid in winter, when the colony has no brood and the mites have no cells to hide in. She keeps a notebook for each hive, its letter on the cover, and writes down every inspection: the weight, the number of frames with brood, the temper of the bees, the weather.

INSIDE A COLONY

Opening a hive with her is a lesson without a blackboard. She lifts out a

frame, holds it against the low sun and points with a gloved finger: here the sealed brood, under caps of biscuit-coloured wax; here the larvae, white and curled at the bottom of each cell; along the top edge the honey; between them a band of pollen in many colours, orange from marigolds, grey from hackberries, nearly black from poppies. In July a strong colony gathers fifty thousand workers, a few hundred drones and a single queen, who lays up to two thousand eggs a day and lives four or five years if nobody replaces her.

“The queen doesn’t rule anything,” she says. “She lays eggs. The workers decide: when to raise a new queen, when to swarm, which flower to work this week.”

Finding her in the crowd takes patience. She is longer than the others, with a pointed abdomen and short wings, and the workers around her form a ring, facing inwards. Aldaba marks every queen with a dot of paint on the thorax, in a colour that depends on the year she was born, following an international code any beekeeper can read: white, yellow, red, green and blue, then round again. This year it is white.

SATURDAYS IN OCTOBER

For four years she has taught a beginners’ course on the Saturdays of October, for eight people, in the composing room. There is a waiting list. Most of those who sign up are retired people and teachers, the odd biology student and, last year, a bus driver who had watched the swarm on the bus shelter from his seat and wanted to know what had happened. The rules of the course fit on a card: no perfume, no black clothes, no sudden movements, no blowing on the frames. At the end of the fourth session each student opens a hive alone, with her standing beside them, hands in her pockets.

“The technique isn’t the hard part,” she says. “The hard part is keeping still

with four bees walking across your veil.”

WHAT A JAR COSTS

The roof’s honey sells at seven euros for a quarter-kilo jar, and last year about twelve hundred were sold. The accounts, which Aldaba keeps in another notebook, show no profit. What comes in pays for the jars, the labels, the sugar she feeds the weak colonies in autumn, the varroa treatments, the foundation wax for new frames and a liability insurance the cooperative asked for from the first year. For each jar sold, one euro goes into the workshops’ common fund, “as rent for the roof”. Last year that money paid for mending the leaks.

Whatever is left, when anything is, she spends on books. She has a small library of beekeeping in the old overseer’s office, partly bound by herself, with nineteenth-century treatises bought at flea markets and the journals of beekeepers’ associations from half of Europe.

OTHER ROOFS

The roof of Gráficas Lezcano is no longer the only one. Since 2019 hives have appeared on the roof of a secondary school, on a hotel in the centre and on the terrace of a care home, where a group of residents looks after them with help from a local beekeeper. Aldaba has advised almost all of them, and she tells each the same thing: not to keep more hives than the neighbourhood can feed.

“Put a hundred hives in a square kilometre and the honeybees take the food from one another, and from the bumblebees and the solitary bees, which are the ones that really pollinate a lot of the city’s plants,” she says. “Fourteen is plenty for this street.”

So this year she has not split a single colony, though three were strong enough. She would rather the surplus bees left as a swarm in spring and were collected by a neighbour with hives

Continued

in the country. A list of phone numbers is taped to the door of the stairwell, next to the cooperative's calendar, and the local police have a copy.

HARVEST IN THE COMPOSING ROOM

The honey is extracted where she worked for so many years. The composing room has stood empty since 2011, apart from two wooden type cabinets with their cases, which the cooperative kept “just in case”. There, on a long table, Aldaba uncaps the frames with a hot knife and loads them into a four-frame extractor turned by hand. The honey runs into a drum through a double filter and settles for a week before it is jarred.

Children from the pottery school come down to watch. Some take away a piece of comb on a plate; others prefer the type cases, and Aldaba lets them set their names in a composing stick and print them on the platen press, next to the honey label.

“A hive is like a case of type,” she tells them. “Everything has its place. If you know where it is, you don’t have to look.”

By the end of October the roof goes still. The winter bees, which live longer than the summer ones, cluster in the middle of each box around the queen, and Aldaba only goes up to check that no water has got in. She leaves the hives enough honey to see the winter through and does not open them again until March, when the almond trees in the park flower and the first workers go out for pollen. By then she will know which colonies came through the cold, and whether A is still the fierce one.

Patio is a magazine invented for this cookbook; so are Carmen Aldaba, Gráficas Lezcano and their roof. Photographs generated with diffusion models. Set in Literata, Fraunces and Instrument Sans (SIL OFL) · Text: CC BY 4.0