

GOING APE IN A REMOTE ALBANIAN VILLAGE

how traditional beekeeping
is getting a modern
makeover



Beekeeping has been a way of life at the Hojeza Farm in Ersekë (Gostivisht), since Egresa Meto's great-grandfather's day.

The 22-year-old Albanian woman works as a programmer in the capital, Tirana, six hours' drive away, but returns every summer to help her parents gather honey, royal jelly and other ecologically pure and healthy products from the 200-hive apiary they keep.

Although the hives have changed little over the years, and the mountain meadows are still a patchwork of wildflowers and lavender, modern technology has gradually been introduced to improve productivity and ease packaging, marketing and sales.

Now Egresa plans to expand production and services, and increase sales domestically and internationally by using her programming skills.

"I have a website that I built myself that is our main selling platform," she says. Online sales are sent out by post – a job she takes on herself.

But to build the company and offer more services – such as the new hive breathing therapy service the farm offers, new products, certification and international exports are needed.

Finding the people to help expand the business in Albania is a real challenge, Egresa admits.

Talking with the European Training Foundation in September at the Turin launch conference of its new four-year (2022-2025) project "Skilling Up the Western Balkan agri-food sector: digitalising, greening," she says: "We plan to employ five people to expand the company – but we can't find professionals in Ersekë. People with the necessary skills can't be found in Albania."

She has a novel solution: beekeepers from abroad, principally America, visit Albania keen to learn traditional beekeeping techniques and to work with types of bees not found in other parts of the world.

It is these people she will target as she seeks to attract workers willing to live in a remote region with few modern services.

In return, these mostly seasonal workers will have a chance to get hands-on experience of both traditional techniques and the new ideas Egresa is introducing.

"We produce honey not just from familiar bee species, but from a wild bee we found in a local forest; currently we have just one hive of these bees. But this is of interest to people involved in apiary culture abroad – and that is why they will come to our farm."

The oxygen therapy is, she says, something new in Albania. Users breathe in the fumes from inside an empty hive for 30 minutes, benefiting from compounds given off by the wax, pollen and propolis – a resinous mixture produced by honeybees using saliva, beeswax and exudate gathered from tree buds, sap flows and other botanical sources.

Hojeza Farm produces 800 kg of honey each year – which sells for up to EUR 30 a kilo – and also produces smaller quantities of royal jelly, propolis, pollen and wax. Royal Jelly is a premium product aimed at those with immune system problems.

Egresa is also working with a laboratory in Tirana to make cosmetic creams that use bee product extracts. "It is a start-up and still at the testing stage," she says.

Her longer-term vision for the farm is to help her 56-year-old father realise his dream – to create an academy for the younger generation of beekeepers based on traditional and modern methods to ensure the culture of beekeeping continues long into the future.