

FROM



Glorious Obscurity TO Modern PRODUCTION:

BY ALAN MOEN

Mead is without a doubt the most magical of alcoholic beverages. Although both beer and wine have their ancient and gloried past, neither can match the romance of mead, probably the oldest fermented drink known to humans.

Celebrated in prose and verse for centuries, this potent concoction made from heavenly honey is a central part of the mythology of Greece, Rome, Scandinavia, and the British Isles. Nor is its heritage limited to Western Europe. The peoples of Sumer, Ethiopia, Egypt, and India also made mead. Indeed, the word honeymoon is derived from the Babylonian tradition of providing newlyweds with enough mead to last a lunar month and so to promote fertility (and supposedly produce male offspring as well). Mead is mentioned in the writings of Plato, as noted by Stephen Harrod Buhner in his book *Sacred and Herbal Healing Beers*: “Plenty (was) drunk with nectar (i.e., mead), for wine was not yet invented.”

In ancient Britain, the indigenous Picts brewed a heather ale from heather and heather honey that was actually a form of mead. Mead is often mentioned in the tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. It was a popular beverage of the Middle Ages, and even, apparently, in Middle Earth as Gandalf the wizard “had...drunk at least a quart of mead” at the house of Beorn in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*.

The Vikings also consumed great quantities of mead and ale. All Norse poetry and song was thought to have originated from the “mead of inspiration” accidentally dropped to Earth by Odin, chief of the gods.

The word “mead” itself is derived from the Old English word “medu” and the Middle English term “mede,” which also meant meadow. In Sanskrit, “madhu” is the word for honey; in the Icelandic language, mead is “mjöthir.” Our word “honey” itself comes directly from the Middle English “hony” (“hunig” in Old English). The Dutch and Germans called it “honig;” it was “hurrang” in Icelandic.

Just as humans “tamed” barley and grapes, the domestication of honey production was surely one of the hallmarks of early civilization. Honeycombs were often found in the hollow trunks of trees, and ancient beekeepers cut these down and carried them to more desirable locations. Such primitive hives gave way to man-made wooden or ceramic cylinders called skeps. Cross pieces were added inside for the attachment of the honeycombs. So-called bar hives with movable combs were mentioned in a book published by Giovanni Rucellai in 1590. Movable frames were added to the basic box shape in the late 1700’s. As agriculture spread to the United

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States, beekeeping followed, since bees were used for the pollination of many crops. This author's grandfather kept hives at his farm near Rainier, Washington. His "beekeepers bible" was *The ABC and XYZ of Bee Culture* by A.I. and E. R. Root, first published in Ohio in 1878. Grandpa collected some remarkable honeys in his time (fireweed was his favorite.) Unfortunately, he never made mead.

In our era of communications and computers, science has supplanted much of the mystery of natural foods and alcoholic fermentations. Nevertheless, mead retains a legendary, almost spiritual place in human culture.

One reason for this is probably the relative scarcity of commercial examples of meads today. Supermarkets regularly stock hundreds of beers and wines, but few meads are available to consumers, even in specialty shops. Breweries and brewpubs rarely make mead. Because of mead's similarities to wine, small wineries have become the major purveyors of mead across the U.S. Many of them are located outside the largest wine-producing regions. Yet meaderies *per se* do exist, and their number has slowly grown, although mead production is still minuscule compared to that of breweries, wineries, or even cideries.

Fortunately, as many homebrewers know, excellent mead is still being legally produced at home in most states. Perhaps as the health benefits of both honey and alcohol are better known, mead will regain more popular acceptance in the marketplace as well.

As well it should, since honey itself, the principal ingredient of mead, is truly a mysterious and wonderful substance. Manufactured by bees

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THE BUZZ About Mead



Mead Producers

United States

Ambrosia by Kristy

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
University Place, WA
www.amead.com

Anderson's Orchard and Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Valparaiso, IN

As You Like It Winery

Produces: Traditional mead
Ashby, MA
www.spirit-alembic.com

Bargetto Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet) with spices
Soquel, CA
www.bargetto.com

Bayfield Winery

Produces: Traditional mead
Bayfield, WI
www.exercpc.com/baywine

Berrywine Plantation

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet) and Ethiopian tej style (hopped)
Mount Airy, MD
www.linganore-wine.com

Bias Vineyards and Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Berger, MO

Bonair Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet), metheglin, cherry melomel
Zillah, WA

Camas Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet), tej, huckleberry and raspberry melomel
Moscow, ID
www.palouse.net/camas

Chateau Lorane

Produces: huckleberry and raspberry melomel
Lorane, OR

China Bend Winery

Produces: melomel
Kettle Falls, WA
www.chinabend.com

Cuthills Vineyards

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet), raspberry melomel
Pierce, NE

Earle Estates Meadery

Produces: Traditional mead
Locke, NY
www.meadery.com

Easley's Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Indianapolis, IN
usagrandprix.com

Fred's Mead Company

Produces: Traditional mead (semi-sweet)
Gainesville, FL
http://fredsmead.com

Golden Angels Cellars

Produces: Traditional meads, raspberry and cherry melomel, cyser
Eureka, CA
www.goldfangels.com

Heidrun Meadery

Produces: Sparkling mead (dry)
Arcata, CA
www.heidrunmeadery.com

Honey Run Winery

Produces: blackberry, cranberry, elderberry, cherry melomel
Chico, CA
www.honeyrun.com

Honeywood Winery

Produces: Traditional mead
Salem, OR

James Arthur Vineyards

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Raymond, NE
www.jamesarthurvineyards.com

Knippath Cellars

Produces: Raspberry melomel, sparkling mead
Spokane, WA
www.knippath-cellars.com

Lakewood Vineyards

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Watkins Glen, NY
www.lakewoodvineyards.com

Little Hungary Farm Winery

Produces: Melomel
Buckhannon, WV

Loudon Valley Vineyard & Winery

Produces: Traditional mead
Loudon, TN

Manatawny Creek Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Douglassville, PA

Martin's Honey Farm and Meadery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet and dry)
Sterling, NY
www.zlink.net/~martinhf

Mountain Meadows Mead

Produces: Traditional mead (semi-sweet and sweet), spiced mead, apricot, persimmon, and cranberry melomels
Westwood, CA

Native Wines

Produces: Traditional mead, honey wines
Mt. Pleasant, UT

Nehalem Bay Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Nehalem, OR
www.nbwines.com

Oliver Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Bloomington, IN

Pirtles Weston Vineyards

Produces: Traditional mead (organic), sparkling mead, raspberry and blackberry melomels
Weston, MO
www.pirtlewine.com

Rocky Mountain Meadery

Produces: Traditional meads (dry to sweet), melomels, piment
Palisades, CO
www.wlc.net/meadery

Sky River Brewing

Produces: Traditional mead (dry, semi-sweet, sweet)
Sultan, WA

Spurgeon Vineyards & Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (sweet)
Highland, WI
www.spurgeonvineyards.com

Stoney Mesa Winery

Produces: Traditional mead
Cedaredge, CO
www.stoneymesa.com

Summerset Winery B & B

Produces: Traditional mead (semi-sweet)
Indianola, IA
www.summersetwine.com
iowawine.com

Volcano Winery

Produces: Traditional mead
Volcano, HI

Von Jakob Vineyards

Produces: Pymment (concord grape)
Pomona, IL
www.vonjacobvineyard

White Winter Winery

Produces: Traditional mead (dry and sweet, melomels, cyser, braggot (bracket), piment)
Iron River, WI
www.whitewinter.com

Widmer Brothers Brewing Co.

Produces: Specialty traditional mead (sweet)
Portland, OR
www.widmer.com

Canada

Bernard Bee Bec

Produces: Traditional mead
Beebe, Quebec

Entreprises Prince-Leclerc

Produces: Traditional mead (dry and sweet)
St-Agapit, QC

Intermil

Produces: Traditional mead
St-Benoit (Mirabel), QC

Les Vins Mustier Gerzer

St-Antoine Abbé, QC

London Winery

London, ON

Meadery Ferme Apicole Desrochers D

Produces: Traditional mead and melomel
Ferme Neuve, QC

Musée De L'Abeille (The Bee Museum)

Produces: Traditional mead and melomel
Chateau-Richer, QC

Rucher Les Saules

Saxby Corner, Granby, QC

Commercial Meads

Mead is a beverage of considerable variety. Even not considering the different styles of mead—dry, sweet, sparkling, or meads made with the addition of fruits or spices—meads offer many different appearances, aromas, and flavors. The following are some comparisons based on my tasting notes on some commercial meads available in the United States today. Like any tasting or judging, it is admittedly subjective, and should be seen as no more than a rough guide to the meads evaluated. It is also meant to stimulate more research! I encourage readers to search out these remarkable elixirs and conduct tastings of their own. But beware: mead can be habit-forming. There's a reason it has kept the attention of the human race for so many thousands of years.

Color

Traditional meads, like the honeys used to produce them, have a wide range of color. Some are nearly as pale as water, such as the Sky River, Camelot Mead or White Winter Meads. Others have a slightly pink tinge such as Cuthills Vineyards Mead or Nehalem Bay Mead. Pirtle Missouri Mead has a pale peach color. Pale gold meads include Ambrosia by Kristy, Chaucer's Mead, Martin's Mead, Spurgeon Vineyards Mead, Summerset Mead. Medium gold meads are Golden Angels Star Thistle and Blackberry Meads, Mountain Meadows Meads (semi-sweet and sweet), and Mystic Mead. Medium to deep gold meads include As You Like It Mead, Easley's Mead, Golden Angels Golden Mead, and Manatawny Creek Winery Mead.

Aroma

The presence of sulfites, rarely mentioned in mead evaluations, actually can have a huge effect on the perception of mead aroma. While sulfites prevent oxidation, delicate honey flavors are blunted or even completely obscured by excess sulfur in the nose, a common fault among some of the examples tasted. Just as in wine, sulfur can block aroma without being consciously perceived. I found the Spurgeon and Sky River Meads were particularly sulfurous. On the other hand, Golden Angels Meads, the only meads tasted without sulfites, had pronounced honey and fruit aromas with little or no oxidation.

Different honeys have different aromas, and so do the meads produced from them. The Golden Angels Blackberry Mead has a fruity/musky aroma, whereas Golden Angels Star Thistle Mead is herba-

ceous and resinous. Camas Winery Mead has an apple and pear bouquet. Camelot Mead from Oliver Winery has a winery, floral aroma. Chateau Lorane Life Force Mead had a Chenin Blanc-like, almost tropical fruit cocktail nose. Citrus aromas are found in some meads, such as Ambrosia by Kristy, Loudon Valley Vineyard Mead, and White Winter Sweet and Dry meads.

Flavor and Body

Mead can be anything from light and delicate to full-bodied and rich in flavor. Like wine, mead flavor is best when the sweetness or intensity of its taste is balanced by an appropriate amount of acidity. Here meads vary considerably. Dry meads, such as Sky River, White Winter, Rocky Mountain King Arthur, and James Arthur Vineyards' Sir James are all fairly austere, with noticeable acidity like many dry Riesling wines. Medium sweet meads are Ambrosia by Kristy, As You Like It Mead, James Arthur Chérie, Rocky Mountain Lancelot Mead, Sky River Semi-Sweet, Stoney Mesa Mead, and Mountain Meadows Mead. Sweet meads, which are often full-bodied, include Camelot Mead, Chateau Lorane Life Force Mead, Chaucer's Mead, Easley's Mead, the Golden Angels Meads, Manatawny Creek Mead, Mountain Meadows Honeymoon Nectar, Mystic Mead, Pirtle Mead, Rocky Mountain Camelot Mead, Sky River Sweet Mead, and Summerset Mead.

Oak

Some meaderies age their meads in oak wine barrels, which introduces additional aroma and flavor components. Both Mountain Meadows traditional meads (as well as their Spice Mead) have some oaky aroma, flavors and tannins, from their use of French and American cooperage.

Finish

The overall impression of a mead is probably most important. Many have a sweet, lingering finish, such as Martin's or Mountain Meadows. Some are more supple and delicate, like Golden Angels Blackberry Mead. Drier meads may seem more acidic in flavor and finish, such as James Arthur Sir James, Sky River Dry Mead or White Winter Dry Mead.

Tasting the range of meads now available is a fascinating experience. With the variety of styles and approaches to making mead, a whole new world awaits those willing to investigate new versions of this oldest of all alcoholic beverages.



from nectar gathered from the flowers and sugary secretions of plants, honey is the most readily accessible natural sugar on Earth. The National Honey Board gives it this definition: "Honey is the nectar and sweet deposits of plants as gathered, modified and stored in the honeycomb of honey bees." It is important to recognize that honeys are not just produced from plant flowers, but also from the saps of various trees. However, not all such honeys are suitable for making mead. In fact, according to Buhner, honeys produced from poisonous plants, such as certain species of rhododendrons and azaleas, will themselves contain poisons that can be passed on to humans.

Honey varies considerably in both color and flavor depending on the plants it is gathered from. The most common variety in North America comes from clover or alfalfa, usually white or pale in color. Other pale honeys are made from acacia, raspberry, fireweed, milkweed, Canada thistle, and star thistle, which is actually (continued on page 57)

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The Buzz about Mead (from page 33)

considered a noxious weed since it is poisonous to cattle. Orange blossom honey has an appropriately citrus aroma. Amber honeys usually are fuller-flavored and include goldenrod, lavender, wild sunflower, magnolia, eucalyptus, and royal palm. Buckwheat and heather honeys are dark reddish-brown and have a pungent, almost woody flavor. Those interested in more details on the character of honey should see "Mastering Mead Formulation: The Art and Science of the Sacred Honey Brew" which begins on page 26 of this issue.

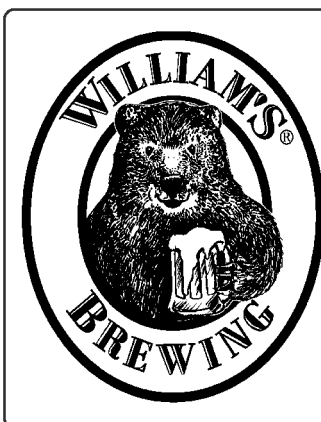
Kinds of Mead

Mead, sometimes called "honey wine," can be dry or sweet, still or sparkling. Its color can range from extremely pale gold to deep amber. Meads have fruity, often rather volatile aromas, a variety of fruit (and honey!) flavors, medium to full body, and an alcoholic content more like wine than beer (10-14 percent a.b.v.) When spices or herbs are added, mead is called metheglin. An interesting variation of this is mead to which hops are added, called *tej* in Ethiopia. Mead produced with the addition of various fruits such as strawberry, raspberry, or blackberry is known as melomel. If grapes are used, the resulting beverage is known as pyment (hippocras if it is also spiced). A honey-and-hard apple cider combination is called cyser.

Commercial Meadmaking

There are now over 40 commercial producers of mead in the United States and Canada. Most are wineries, but some produce mead exclusively. Many meadmakers began as homebrewers or amateur wine-makers, like Kristy Anderson of Ambrosia by Kristy in University Place, WA.

"I was history major in college in Oregon," Kristy says. "I read a lot about mead, but I couldn't find any anywhere. But a friend of mine gave me some of his home-made mead. It was so good that I wanted to make it myself." After some experimentation, Kristy began her meadery in 1997. She buys honey from a local beekeeper in Graham, WA, near Mt. Rainier. Using a blend of blackberry, star thistle, and fireweed varieties, Kristy has had her mead produced under contract by a winery. So far she has



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released only one mead, a sweet style, which is made in 1500 gallon lots (630 cases). Ambrosia by Kristy is now sold in both Washington and Oregon.

For Denise Ingalls of Sultan, WA, mead-making was an outgrowth of another family business, namely honey. Her father-in-law, Mike Ingalls, runs the Pure Foods corporation, a honey processor and wholesaler to the food industry. When Denise and her husband, Derek, became interested in producing mead, they set up a separate company about a year ago called Sky River Brewing, which is actually situated within part of the Pure Foods warehouse.

Following the philosophy of Pure Foods, Sky River uses very little local honey, even though the meadery is located in an agricultural area. Because of pesticides used on many local crops, which may contaminate honey created from them, Pure Foods buys honey from spray-free sources all over the world, including Australia and Argentina.

Like many newer meaderies, Sky River does not pasteurize or boil its honey to remove impurities, but filters it instead using a special membrane filter or "ultrafilter", a technique developed by Bob Kine at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY in 1991. Even though the meadery calls this a "cold filtration", it is actually carried out at temperatures as high as 120°F (49°C).

Sky River has three 500 gallon stainless uni-tanks for its mead production, two fermentors and a conditioning tank, all of which are jacketed for temperature control. After initial fermentation at about 70°F (21°C), additions of SO₂ and acid are also made. The mead is chilled to near freezing temperatures for several weeks before bottling.

Currently Sky River produces three meads—dry, semi-sweet, and sweet. All are quite pale, with delicate honey flavors. The Ingalls plan to develop more styles in the future, including melomels with various fruits. "We believe in producing different tastes for different people," Denise says.

For William Martin of Martin's Honey Farm and Meadery in Sterling, NY, making mead was also an outgrowth of another family business. After producing small amounts of honey for personal use and local sales for more than 20 years, "it almost seemed natural that we begin to produce our own mead," he says. Martin produced his first sweet mead in 1999, and is now making a dry style as well.

Eric Sorensen, owner of Golden Angels Cellars in Eureka, CA began meadmaking as a hobby while working at the Lost Coast Brewery. He had previously taken homebrewing classes from mead guru Byron Burch in Santa Rosa, and tasted some of Burch's award-winning meads. When his plans to build a brewery fell through, Eric decided to start a meadery instead.

In part of a 12,000 square foot building on Eureka's waterfront, Sorenson opened a gift shop and meadery/winery in 1998. The production area consists of one 17- and four 20-barrel stainless fermentors that were once serving tanks for a Seattle brewpub. Eric also uses three 11-barrel tanks purchased from Lost Coast and a few 52 gallon barrel drums and wine barrels for aging his meads.

Golden Angels makes three separate "varietal" meads from huckleberry blossom, blackberry, and star thistle honeys. Sorenson buys honey from local producers and a honey broker at a cost of 70 cents to \$1.40 per pound,