

Making Mead - Using Simple Methods by Roger Patterson

This article is intended for beekeepers because they have a ready supply of honey and may be able to select it for flavour. Non-beekeepers will be able to make good mead by using some of the cheap imported honey that is available, but look closely at the label. Make sure it is pure honey without additives such as corn syrup. If it is pleasant to taste and doesn't burn the back of your throat, it will probably make quite good mead.

In my view, mead is not made by beekeepers as much as it should be, as when well made I find it a joy to drink. For some strange reason many beekeepers seem to be suspicious of mead and I don't really know why. Mead has the reputation of being "strong" and "sweet", which shows a lack of knowledge of the process. In general the alcoholic strength is little different than a commercial table wine (perhaps 1-2% abv higher) and sweetness depends on the amount of honey used.

I have tasted some very good mead, but equally I have had some where I didn't want a second glass. By following simple instructions and using a little care very drinkable mead can be easily made. You must remember that because honey varies in flavour, so will your mead and you won't often be able to repeat the same results. One good thing is that you can tweak your recipe a little to suit yourself. Whatever you do, I suggest making notes.

Mead is very simple to make and can be done with the minimum of equipment. All that is needed, other than what can be found in the kitchen, is some kind of vessel for fermenting and storing. The obvious containers are demijohns, and these are readily available, either new, or at such places as car boot or jumble sales. Do sniff inside them to make sure they have not been used for something that might taint your precious liquid. I have some 10 gallon containers I bought at the West Sussex BKA Bee Auction at Brinsbury, that were previously used for wine and they are excellent. In general, I think the bigger the vessel for fermenting and storage, the better the mead. I know that some sources advise using wooden casks, but they aren't easily obtained and I have always found glass satisfactory.

There are few books on making mead, probably because it is so simple to make, but there is quite a lot of information on the web, although you may have to be a bit selective. There are several other alcoholic drinks made with honey and these are called something else such as cyser, metheglin, melomel, etc, depending on what the other ingredients are. The commercially available "Mead" is usually not mead at all, but sickly sweet grape based wine with honey added, perhaps the reason for the sweet reputation of real mead. Home made mead should not be confused with this at all. I once saw a definition for mead as "The result of fermentation between honey and water, in the presence of fruit acid". It really is that simple.

I use six ingredients:-

Water. Tap water in my area is suitable, but if you have spring water then use it.

Honey. In general the quality of mead reflects the quality of honey, with strong flavoured honey probably not advisable. On occasions I have used fermented honey and although not making top quality mead, I found it has always been acceptable. I have no experience of mead made with ling heather honey, but my guess is those in heather districts do and that it makes good mead. I have never seen reference that it makes bad mead anyway.

If you are a winemaker and have a hydrometer then you can glean honey from cappings, or any other similar source. I have never used this method, so you will have to consult other sources for specific gravity.

3 - 3½lb of honey to the gallon will make a medium mead, ½-1lb either side will make either dry or sweet, but experiment to suit your own taste. The important thing is that you make what you like, not just follow instructions. I

suggest the first time mead maker uses 3½lb honey per gallon, as that will suit most palates. Don't be tempted to add extra honey in a closed bottle, otherwise fermentation is likely to start, resulting in burst bottles.

Yeast. Honey has its own yeast that can cause problems if allowed to ferment. I prefer to kill these off by bringing the mixture to the boil, so the introduced yeast controls the ferment.

The really serious mead makers will use Maury, Tokay or Steinberg yeast, but for the ordinary person, I find the normal general purpose dried winemaking or any white wine yeast quite satisfactory. I have also used Gervin No3, which is widely available.

Yeast will be inhibited at both high and low temperatures and vary considerably in the temperature they will work at, with some working at much lower temperatures than others. This is an issue that isn't often mentioned, but could be quite relevant. If you use a yeast that won't work well at low temperatures, then you need to start a batch in the summer, perhaps May, unless you have a warm area or the central heating on during the winter.

Check the temperature at which your chosen yeast will work down to. Gervin No 3 will work well down to about 12°C, so I can start a batch at any time of the year. Some yeasts stop working at considerably higher temperatures.

Nutrient. There is little nitrogenous matter in honey, so we need to introduce some to help the yeast work. Yeast nutrient is available from winemaking suppliers. Some use Marmite, although I never have.

Tannin and Fruit Acid. These can be bought from winemaking suppliers, but I use tea and lemon juice.

Method to make one gallon - multiply up for larger quantities.

- Make up a "starter" to get the yeast active a few hours (6-12) before making the bulk. I half fill a honey or jam jar with water, add a couple of tsp's of honey and a tsp or sachet of yeast, stir it, and leave it covered over in a warm place, but DON'T screw the lid down tight! Too warm and it will bubble over.

- Put the honey in a pan with around 2-3 pints of water, bring to the boil, and simmer gently for a few minutes, no more, otherwise you will damage the eventual mead. This is to kill off the wild yeasts. There will be quite a scum on the top that I don't remove, although some do. The alternative to heating is to use chemicals, which I never have.

- When it is cool, pour into the fermenting vessel, add a tsp of nutrient, the juice of a lemon, ½-1 cup of fairly strong tea and the yeast starter which should be working well. Then fill up to around 3-4 inches below the neck of the vessel with cold water. Put a piece of tough plastic sheet over the neck and secure with an elastic band. An airlock can also be used, but I have broken a lot of them!

- Keep it in a fairly warm place, keeping an eye on it for a few days, as the initial fermentation can be quite strong, causing it to overflow.

- When fermentation dies down a bit after a week or so, top up with water.

- Allow to ferment until it starts to clear, then rack off. The usual advice is to do this several times until there is no sediment left, but on many occasions I have left it on the sediment (I forgot!) and I haven't noticed any detrimental effect.

- Mead matures better in bulk, so leave it until you need it, then bottle off. Maturation will take some time, a minimum of 12 months to be drinkable, but 2-5 years if well made is worth waiting for. I really must point out the importance of this. I know there is a modern view that maturation isn't necessary and that mead can be drunk quickly,

the so-called "quick mead", but it depends on what quality you will accept. I have sampled a lot of mead that is too young and I suspect mead judges have too! Having said that, I quite like drinking fermenting mead.

I have known of many beekeepers who have made one batch of mead, drunk it too young, not really liked it and not made any more.

I had better point out that mead can be unstable. On several occasions I have had a demijohn of clear mead that has apparently finished fermenting some time before, all of a sudden start working again for no apparent reason. If this happens, just let nature take its course, as it is quite natural. I have had secondary fermentation with both sweet and dry mead.

I think it is important to make mead on a regular basis, almost in the same way as you feed your bees and extract the honey. Continuity gives you a regular supply and if you make enough there isn't the temptation to drink it when it is too young. If you have a word with local beekeepers, I think you will be surprised at the amount of honey they waste, especially at extracting time.

Making good mead takes a little care. The following should be useful:-

- Maintain cleanliness.
- Exclude air at all times.
- Use good water. Spring water is ideal, but tap water varies somewhat.
- Use a good wine yeast, not bakers or brewers yeast. Check the temperature it will work at.
- Make notes.
- Be patient. Don't rush things.

In writing the above I have assumed the reader is familiar with normal winemaking practices.

Roger Patterson. 10-12-2004. Revised 22-11-2015.

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