

# **The Effects of Different Honeys on Taste:**

Subtle Differences of Varietals and Their Preparation

Calontir Cooks Symposium: A Temperance of Cooks  
Barony of Forgotten Sea

A.S. XLII

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## **Introduction**

This course is a hands-on opportunity to allow interested parties to investigate the sometimes subtle differences between varietal honeys. It is my hope that participants will develop an appreciation for some of these gentle aspects in use honey to its greatest effect.

One of the simplest vehicles for demonstrating various aspects of honey is a simple mead—honey, water, and yeast. Due to its simplicity, the flavor can be strongly affected by its major constituents (i.e., honey and water), as well as how they are brought together (i.e., the cooking technique). In this class, we are going to examine how each honey and its preparation affects the flavor of simple mead...and hopefully to see honey as more than a simple sweetener.

## **Honeys**

The first thing to look at is how the flavor of the honey varies. One can find an immense variety of honeys. Basically, they vary from locale to locale and even from year to year based upon what the bees can find—sadly, this also means local honeys can vary tremendously in quality from year to year. However, this variety lends to a tremendous palate at the disposal of cooks and mazers—if you develop it.

We will be looking at five different types of honey: alfalfa, tupelo, wildflower (local Oklahoma), and buckwheat. This set should provide a good cross-section of the flavors, which can be found.

Each of the honeys are presented in three ways: directly (using wooden stir sticks), dissolved in water, and fermented as a short mead. While the easiest way to taste the honey is directly, honey tends to coat the tongue and it becomes hard to differentiate when several are compared. For this reason, the weak solution of honey and water is preferred initially. (Of course, small samples of the noted honeys will be available for tasting, as well as other varietals including clover, raspberry, pistachio, and orange blossom.)

The short mead uses the simple recipe attached below. I prefer using a short mead recipe because it finishes quickly and retains a significant portion of the honey flavor. The short mead has an alcoholic content of 1.5-3%. While it is low, I will not to give it to minors—this I leave to the discretion of their parents.

## **"To Boil or Not To Boil"**

At this point, I will take an aside specific to brewing but with direct implications for cooking. The use of boiling is often a point of discussion/debate/argument among mead makers (the word selection usually depends upon the individuals involved).

My preference is to boil the wort. I prefer this for the SCA because it is the predominant technique used in the sources I have found. There are a few recipes made without cooking but they are rather rare. I believe that is probably because the results would have been inconsistent. If the wort is not cooked (and hence sterilized), then other microorganisms can get into the mead and result in an unsavory product.

On the other, today many modern mead makers do not actually boil the wort. They sterilize the water using either heat or chemicals and go from there. (*Teacher's note: I despise the use of chemicals—magic and alchemy!*) The main reason for not cooking the wort is retaining more of the character of the honey. Honey is a very fragrant food. The folks who do not boil their wort feel that the boiling process drives off a great deal of the fragrance. In so doing, the mead is not as good because you have diminished (if not damaged) the honey. Modern mead makers certainly can produce some phenomenal meads but I do not prefer their methods—and the SCA as a group produces superior products.

### **...To the Chase**

All debate aside, let's see if we can taste the difference. Using the same set of varietal honeys, I have produced a second set of short meads. They are made using the same ingredients as the former set but the water is merely pasteurized. To get this, I heat the water until it just begins to form bubbles. At that point, I remove the water from the heat source and dissolve the honey.

Hopefully, this experiment should provide a side-by-side look at how the cooking technique affects the taste—or doesn't. I leave it to my students to tell me what they think.

### **Recipes**

Attached are the two recipes used for the short meads. Again, the elements that are changed is the honeys change for each batch (to see the differences in flavor) and the process differs between boiling and pasteurizing.

### **Results**

I look to my students to tell me—and share with the class. Everyone has an opinion and tastes vary—sometimes wildly!

What do you think?

### **Conclusion**

I hope this is more a beginning than a conclusion. Choosing the proper honey to accent a dish can be as important as choosing the appropriate side dish or wine...it remains to the cook to now go to the kitchen and play—and pass it on!

**A Simple Mead**  
**(Boiled and Scummed)**

**Recipe:**

1	cp	honey (about 0.75 lb)
1/2	gal	water
		ale yeast

**Process:**

Place 2 quarts of water in pot. Bring to a boil. Add honey and skim dross. Cook for 45-60 minutes (until scum no longer rises). Remove from heat. Cover and allow to cool (should be below 110°F). Pour wort into fermenter. Pitch yeast and shake well. Let work for 3 to 5 days, and bottle.

**A Simple Mead**  
**(Pasteurized)**

**Recipe:**

1	cp	honey (about 0.75 lb)
1/2	gal	water
		ale yeast

**Process:**

Place 2 quarts of water in pot. Heat until bubbles just begin to form at bottom of pan. Remove from heat. Dissolve honey in hot water. Cover and allow to cool (should be below 110°F). Pour wort into fermenter. Pitch yeast and shake well. Let work for 3 to 5 days, and bottle.