The Subtler Mysteries of Mead:

The Effects of Varietal Honeys and Cooking

Gulf Wars XIV

A.S. XXXVIV

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Introduction

This course is intended to allow interested parties to investigate the effects of varietal honeys and cooking techniques on mead flavor. It is my hope that participants will develop an appreciation for some of the subtler aspects of mead.

The simplest form of mead is honey, water, and yeast. As such, the flavor can be strongly affected by its major constituents (i.e., honey and water) and how they are brought together (i.e., the cooking technique). In this experiment, we are going to examine how each affects the flavor of mead.

Honeys

The first thing to look at is how the flavor of the honey affects the mead. 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. This type of variation lends to the tremendous variety of meads you find—especially within the SCA.

We will be looking at five different types of honey: clover, local (Oklahoma) wildflower, raspberry, fireweed, and "black" honey (a local wildflower honey from western Virginia). 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, 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 honeys will be available for tasting.)

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 still prefer not to give it to minors without their parent's immediate consent, i.e., parents looking me in the eye.

"To Boil or Not To Boil"

This 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 make it come out poorly.

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 produce some phenomenal meads but I do not prefer their methods.

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.

Remember, I said this is an experiment—I don't know how it will turn out.

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

That is anyone's guess. I look to my students to tell me.

What do <u>you</u> think?

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 110ºF). 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 110ºF). Pour wort into fermenter. Pitch yeast and shake well. Let work for 3 to 5 days, and bottle.