

Liquid Sweets:

The Making of Sundry Meads, Cordials, and Syrups

Bards N Arts IV
A.S. XXXIV

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Introduction

This course is intended to give interested parties an introduction to the various types of savory potables. As the course name implies, I am focusing on the more succulent liquid concoctions. These drinks were produced in many ways, and I will be covering but a few. I admonish those in my class and those who receive these notes to investigate and experiment with other period examples beyond these few recipes.

Basically, I have broken down “liquid sweets” into three categories: non-alcoholic, mildly alcoholic and extremely alcoholic. (I suppose that is natural for a brewer.) The non-alcoholic drinks are either “teas” or syrups. The mildly alcoholic drinks are brewed for short periods of time, and consumed on a daily basis—often they are referred to as “ordinary drinks”. The extremely alcoholic drinks are produced over a period of weeks to months, and most often referred to as “cordiall waters” of various flavors.

Making these drinks, whether through cooking, brewing, or steeping, has a minimum of cardinal rules to ensure good results:

- (1) Keep everything as clean as possible (within reason).
- (2) When you sanitize glassware, nothing beats bleaching and boiling.
- (3) Learn a little patience—brewing and cordial-making are not fast but well worth any wait.
- (4) Don’t make or bottle when you’re ill--it will come back to haunt you (and your friends).
- (5) Take good notes.

Of the three processes, brewing the mildly alcoholic drinks is the most complicated. As such, we will discuss this first, and follow with production of the syrups and cordials.

Brewing meads requires a minimum of basic equipment to get started:

- (1) Large cooking pot (3 to 6 gallons);
- (2) Large glass or food-grade plastic jug, which can be made airtight (a 5 to 6 gallon jug can be had for \$10 to \$20);
- (3) 6 feet of siphon tube;
- (4) rubber stopper with hole;
- (5) bubbler;
- (6) some household strainers;
- (7) suitable space for the fermenter to sit undisturbed for the duration of the brewing process.

The first two items can be obtained at a discount department store, like K-Mart or WalMart. The remainder (in fact, all of these items) can be obtained at a brewing supplies store.

Syrups require far less equipment to produce:

- (1) Medium cooking pot (2 to 5 quarts);
- (2) cutting board;
- (3) some household strainers;
- (4) sturdy muslin sack for straining.

Cordials require a slightly different set of equipment (more like brewing) to produce:

- (1) One-gallon glass jug, which can be made airtight (such as a cider or juice jar);
- (2) large funnel;
- (3) sturdy muslin sack for straining;
- (4) suitable space for the cordial to sit undisturbed for the duration of the process.

For brewing meads, the overall process involves 10 simple steps:

- (1) Boil honey (or malt) and water;
- (2) Skim dross (for honey);
- (3) Add flavoring elements (hops, herbs, spices, juices, peels, etc.);
- (4) Continue cooking for appropriate amount of time;
- (5) Strain into fermenter and allow to cool;
- (6) Pitch yeast;
- (7) Allow to ferment for a while (normally until fermentation ceases);
- (8) Add priming sugars (use malt, corn sugar, honey, corn syrup, etc.)
- (9) Bottle;
- (10) Age.

For producing syrups, the overall process is tremendously simpler:

- (1) Bring water to a boil;
- (2) Dissolve sugar (honey, etc.);
- (3) Add flavoring agents (juices, peels, herbs, etc.);
- (4) Remove from heat and allow to steep;
- (5) Strain into bottle.

For cordials, the process is equally simple:

- (1) Place fruit and flavoring elements (herbs, spices, juices, peels, etc.) in jar;
- (2) Cover with vodka (normally, vodka or grain alcohol);
- (3) Allow to steep;
- (4) Strain into bottle;
- (5) Age.

Background--Meads

Several different names are used for meads and their cousins. In many cases, we have developed a set of definitions, which we tend to follow more rigorously than in period. Currently, some of the following terms are commonly used:

- (1) mead--honey and water with a minimum of herbs, spices, etc.;
- (2) metheglin--honey, water, herbs, and/or spices;
- (3) melomel--honey, water, and fruits or juices;
- (4) pymeth--honey, water, and grapes (like a cross between mead and wine);
- (5) braggot--honey, water, ale, and spices (traditional Welsh drink).

Keep in mind, these are examples. A review of period sources indicates that they were often used interchangeably--especially, mead and metheglin.

Meads typically fell into two categories: short and long. Short meads, as the name implies, took a much shorter brewing time--typically, less than a week before bottling. These drinks were low in alcohol--also referred to as small meads--and were drunk on a daily basis. They were the period equivalent of a soft drink. Long meads took somewhat longer to brew--typically, several weeks to several months. In addition, they tended to be aged for a good deal longer. Some period recipes call for as much as three years before drinking! (Remember, I said this took patience!) The alcoholic content of these meads tends to be in the 7% to 15% range, and were drunk more in the manner of wines.

Background--Syrups

I have little to provide on the matter of background. Basically, a syrup is a simple approach to make water more pleasant. Whether to slake a thirst on a hot day or provide medicinal virtue (or cover the hideous taste thereof), the syrups were simply to please. Some syrups, such as sekanjabin, were roughly the equivalent of our modern lemonade or Gatorade (replacing electrolytes, as well).

Background--Cordials

Cordials and liqueurs were made in one of the three following ways: (1) distillation of a brewed product; (2) infusion in a wine or mead, and distillation of the resulting product; and, (3) infusion in a distilled spirit. The first seems to have been used when the desired flavor was honey or fruit; the last was preferred when the desired flavor was herb or spice. While these processes ultimately involved distillation, a fruit cordial was obtained by producing a wine and then distilling it to a brandy, which might then be sweetened or spiced lightly. In contrast, a spice cordial, such as one of cloves, was obtained by distilling a dry wine, such as sack, and infusing the spice in the resulting spirit. As a result of modern statutes, the latter infusion process tends to be preferred today for almost all types of cordial.

Period Sources

Four fine late-period sources for brewing and distillation are The Jewell House of Art and Nature by Sir Hugh Platt (1594), Delights for Ladies by Sir Hugh Platt (1609), The Queens Closet Opened by W. M. (1655) and The Closet Of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Kt. Opened: Whereby is Discovered Several Ways for Making of Metheglin, Sider, Cherry-Wine, etc. (1669). Each of these works has various discussions of beers and ales. Certainly, the work of Sir Kenelme Digbie is unequalled with its vast array of recipes for mead, metheglin, wine, and ale--over 140 recipes in all! The mead recipes below draw heavily from his work--commonly referred to as The Closet Opened.

In addition, the works of Sir Hugh Platt and W. M.(taken from the Receipt Books of Queen Henrietta Marie, wife of Charles I) are especially instructive on the arts of distillation and the making of "the extractions of all hearbs". In addition, Sir Kenelme Digbie discusses how to make cordials (although he is better known for his vast array of recipes for mead, metheglin, and ale.) These works serve as the principal historical basis for the author's entries in the category of cordials. The author has included, as an attachment to the article, specific passages considered most illuminating to this area of inquiry.

Acknowledgements:

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Sir William Paston's Mead

Recipe:

7 1/2	lbs	honey (about 5 pt.)
2 1/2	Tbsp	rosemary
2 1/2	Tbsp	bay leaves (about 40-45 leaves)
2		lemons
		ale yeast

Process:

Scrape lemons with serrated knife to remove peel--no pith (white part) as it will give the mead a bitter taste. Place 2 gallons of water in pot. Bring to a boil. Add honey and skim dross. Add rosemary, bay, and lemon peel. Cook for 30 minutes. Remove from heat. Pour 3 gallons of cold water into fermenter. Strain wort into fermenter. Top off with remaining water to 5 gallons. Allow to cool. During cooling, close container or cover mouth with a bleach-soaked rag. Pitch yeast and shake well. Let work for 3 to 5 days, and bottle or keg. Ready to serve in about 10 days. Alcohol content is approximately 2%.

Source:

SIR WILLIAM PASTON'S MEATHE, The Closet Opened, pg. 41-42.

Take ten Gallons of Spring-water, and put therein ten Pints of the best honey. Let this boil half an hour, and scum it very well; then put in one handful of Rosemary, and as much of Bayleaves; with a little Limon-peel. Boil this half an hour longer, then take it off the fire, and put it into a clean Tub; and when it is cool, work it up with yest, as you do Beer. When it is wrought, put it into your vessel, and stop it very close. Within three days you may Bottle it, and in ten days after it will be fit to drink.

Angel's Short Mead

Recipe:

5	gal	water
7 1/2	lbs	honey (about 5 pt.)
1/2	hand	ginger, sliced
1	Tbsp	balm (lemon balm or balm mint)
2	Tbsp	spearmint
2	Tbsp	elderflowers
4		cloves
2		lemons
		ale yeast (Edme)

Process:

Scrape lemons with serrated knife to remove peel--no pith (white part) as it will give the mead a bitter taste. Place 2 gallons of hot water in pot. Bring to a boil. Add honey and skim dross. Add ginger, balm, spearmint, elderflowers, and lemon peel. Cook until ginger is limp and various flavors are evident (usually 30-35 minutes to bring out elderflowers in color and bouquet). Add cloves. Cook until cloves appear in bouquet--about 5 minutes. Remove from heat. Pour 3 gallons of cold water into fermenter. Strain wort into fermenter. Top off to 5 gallons. Allow to cool to about 100°F. During cooling, close container or cover mouth with a bleach-soaked rag. Pitch yeast and shake well. Let work for 3 to 5 days, and bottle or keg. Ready to serve in about 10 days. Alcohol content is approximately 2%.

If any remains after 3 weeks, refrigerate!

Source:

SEVERAL SORTS OF MEATH, SMALL & STRONG, 2. Small, The Closet Of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Opened, pg. 56.

Take ten quarts of water, and and one of honey, Balm a little; Minth, Cloves, Limon-peel, Elder-flowers, a little Ginger; wrought with a little yest, bottle it after a night working.

Sima

Recipe:

3	gal	water
3	cp	sugar
3	cp	brown sugar
2/3	cp	raisins
6		lemons
		ale yeast (Edme)

Process:

Scrape lemons with serrated knife to remove peel--no pith (white part) as it will give the mead a bitter taste. Squeeze lemons. Set juice and peel aside. Place 1 gallon of hot water in pot. Bring to a boil. Add sugar, brown sugar, lemon juice, and lemon peel. Remove from heat and steep for 10 minutes. Add remaining 2 gallons of cold water. Strain wort into fermenter. Allow to cool to about 100°F (with these proportions, there is usually no waiting period.) Pitch yeast and shake well. Let work overnight--or at least 8-10 hours--in a warm place under a bubble. Add raisins and bottle. Let stand until raisins float. Chill and store in a cool place until ready to serve. Self-conditioning. Alcohol content is approximately 2%.

Source:

This recipe was translated for me by a dear friend in An Tir. The recipe was from his grandmother's cookbook, Finnish Holiday Cookbook, 1924. Not exactly period, I confess, but quite traditional. I am still looking for a period citation.

Stepponi

Recipe:

1	gal	water
1	lb	raisins
1/2	lb	sugar
2		lemons

Process:

Boil water. Place raisins and sugar in an earthen pot. Squeeze lemons over raisins and sugar. Slice rinds and throw into pot. Pour boiling water over mixture. Let stand for 24 hours. Filter into bottles and chill.

Source:

TO MAKE STEPPONI, The Closet Of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Opened, pg. 106.

Take a Gallon of Conduit-water, one pound of blew Raisins of the Sun stoned, and half a pound of Sugar. Squeeze the juyce of two Limons upon the Raisins and Sugar, and slice the rindes upon them. Boil the water, and pour it so hot upon the ingredients in an earthen pot, and stir them well together. So let it stand twenty four hours. Then put it into bottles (having first let it run through a strainer) and set them in a Cellar or other cool place.

Black Raspberry Cordial

Recipe:

4	lb	fresh black raspberries
3	cp	grain alcohol (see note 1)
2	cp	sugar syrup (see note 2)

Process:

Clean raspberries. Place in 1 gallon jug. Cover with grain alcohol. Shake well every day for 3 weeks. Remove raspberries. Add sugar. Allow to clear.

Notes:

- 1) Use a good grain alcohol, e.g., Clear Spring or Golden Grain. Try to select one which is low on esthers. In other words, do not use Everclear.
- 2) In period, sugar was a rare commodity. However, I have found techniques for producing sugar from both Digbie and Platt. As a result, I believe that its use was not unknown although somewhat rare. In addition, I make a syrup from 2 parts sugar to 1 part water (heated until the sugar is completely dissolved). The syrup dissolves more readily into the cordial.

Sources:

The Jewell House of Art and Nature, Sir Hugh Platt, 1594, pp. 29-30

How to give a prettie grace both in tast and propertie, unto the spirit of wine.

If you infuse the same upon the rinde of a civel sower Orange, or Lymon, you shall finde a pleasaunt and comfortable taste thereby, or if you woulde not have the same descried by his colour, you may redistill the spirit so tinted in balneo. Some give a tuch unto the spirit of wing with rosemary, some with annis seedes, some with sweet fennell seedes: som with one seed, or hearbe, and some with another, by infusing the same a day or two upon them.

Delights for Ladies, Sir Hugh Platt, 1609, p. 50

4. *Spirit of wine, tasting of what vegetable you please.*

Macerate Rosemary, Sage, sweet Fennell seeds, Marioram, Lemmon or Orenge pils, &c. in spirit of wine a day or two, and then distill it over again, unless you had rather have it in his proper colour. for so you shall have it upon the first infusion without any farther distillation: and some young Alchymists doe hold these for the true spirits of vegetables.

The Closet Of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Opened, 1669, pp. 22-25

SACK WITH CLOVE-GILLY FLOWERS

If you will make a Cordial Liquor of Sack with Clove-gillyflower, you must do thus. Prepare your Gillyflowers, as is said before, and put them into great double glass-bottles, that hold two gallons a piece, or more; and put to every gallon of Sack, a good half pound of the wiped and cut flowers, putting in the flowers first, and then the Sack upon them. Stop the glasses exceeding close, and set them in a temperate Cellar. Let them stand so, till you see that the Sack hath drawn out all the principal tincture from the, and that the flower begin to look palish; (with an eye of pale, or faint in Colour) Then pour the Sack from them, and throw away the exhausted flowers, or distil a spirit from them; For if you let them remain longer in the Sack, they will give an earthy tast to them. You may then put the

tincted Sack into fit bottles for your use, stopping them very close. But if the season of the flowers be not yet past, your Sack will be better, if you put it upon new flowers, which I conceive will not be the worse, but peradventure the better, if they be a little dried in the shade. If you drink a Glass or two of this sack at a meal, you will find it a great Cordial.

Upon better consideration; I conceive the best way of making Hydromel with Clove-gillyflowers, is thus: Boil your simple Liquor to its full height (with three parts of water to one of Honey), take a small parcel out, to make a strong infusion of flowers, pouring it boyling hot upon the flowers in earthen vessels. If you have great quantity, as six to one, of Liquor, you will easily draw out the tincture in fourteen or sixteen hours infusion; otherwise you may quicken your liquor with a parcel of Sack. In the mean time make the great quantity of Liquor work with yest. When it hath almost done fermenting, but not quite, put the infusion to it warm, and let it ferment more if it will. When that is almost done, put to it a bag with flowers to hang in the bung.

I conceive that Hydromel made with Juniper-berries (first broken and bruised) boiled in it, is very good. Adde also to it Rosemary and Bay-leaves.

Upon tryal of several ways, I conclude (as things yet appear to me) that to keep Meath long, it must not be fermented with yest (unless you put Hops to it) but put it in the barrel, and let it ferment of it self, keeping a thick plate of lead upon the bung, to lie close upon it, yet so that the working of the Liquor may raise it, to purge out the foulness, and have always some new made plain Liquor, to fill it up as it sinks, warm whiles it works: but cold during three or four month's after. Then stop the bung exceeding close. And when you will make your Mead with Cherries or Morello-Cherries, or Raspes, or Bilberries, or Black-cherries, put their juyce to the Liquor when you tun it, without ever boiling it therein; about one quart of juyce to every three or four gallons of Liquor. You may squeeze out the clear juyce, and mingle it with the Liquor, and hang the Magma in a bag in the bung. I think it is best to break the stones of the Cherries, before you put their Magma into the bag.

Since I conceive, that Clove-gilly-flowers must never be boiled in the Liquor: that evaporateth their Spirits, which are very volatile: But make a strong infusion of them, and besides hang a Bag of them in the bung. I conceive that it is good to make the Liquor pretty strong (not too much, but so as the taste may be gratefull) of some strong herbs, as Rosemary, Bayleaves, Sweet-marjoram, Thyme, Broad-thyme, and the like. For they preserve the drink, and make it better for the stomach and head. Standing in the Sun is the best way of Fermentation, when the drink is strong. The root of Angelica or Elecampane, or Eringo, or Orris, may be good and pleasant, to be boiled in the Liquor. Raspes and Cherries and Bilberies are never to be boiled, but their juyce put into the Liquor, when it is tunning. Use onely Morello-Cherries (I think) for pleasure, and black ones for health. I conceive it best to use very little spice of any kind in Meathes.

Cinnamon Cordial

Recipe:

12	stick	cinnamon
1	qt	vodka (Finlandia)
1 1/3	cp	sugar (see note 1)
2	tbsp	honey (see note 2)

Process:

Place cinnamon sticks in container. Cover with vodka. Let stand for 1 week. Strain into second container. Add sugar and honey. Allow to clear.

Notes:

- 1) In period, sugar was a rare commodity. However, I have found techniques for producing sugar from both Digbie and Platt. As a result, I believe that its use was not unknown although somewhat rare.
- 2) The small quantity of honey is used to help reduce any bitterness from the fruit or the vodka.

Sources:

Same as previous recipe.

Peppered Strawberry Cordial

Recipe:

4	lb	fresh strawberries
1	qt	vodka (Finlandia)
1 1/3	cp	sugar (see note 1)
2	tbsp	honey (see note 2)
1/2	tsp	mace
1/2		cinnamon stick (3")
4		cloves
2		peppercorns

Process:

Clean and chop strawberries. Place in 1 gallon jug. Cover with vodka. Shake well every day for 1 week. Add spices. Let stand for 2 days. Strain into second container. Add sugar and honey. Allow to clear.

Notes:

- 1) In period, sugar was a rare commodity. However, I have found techniques for producing sugar from both Digbie and Platt. As a result, I believe that its use was not unknown although somewhat rare.
- 2) The small quantity of honey is used to help reduce any bitterness from the fruit or the vodka.

Sources:

Same as previous recipe.

Bainnecor

(pronounced Bonn-i-kur--Gaelic for “heart of milk”)

Recipe:

1	qt	grain alcohol
3	lb	sugar
2	qt	milk
1	oz	vanilla beans
1		lemon

Process:

Pour milk into gallon jar. Cut lemon into small pieces (don't waste any of the juices), and add the lemon and juice to the milk. Add the alcohol, then sugar, then vanilla. Shake well and let stand for 2 to 3 weeks. Filter into bottle.

Sekanjabin

Recipe:

4	cp	sugar
1	cp	wine vinegar
2 1/2	cp	water
1	hdbl	fresh mint

Process:

Dissolve sugar in water. Bring mixture to a boil and add vinegar. Simmer 1 hour. Add mint, remove from fire, and allow to cool.

Notes:

- 1) Dilute the resulting syrup to taste with cool water (5 to 10 parts water to 1 part syrup).
- 2) The syrup stores without refrigeration.

Source:

SEKANJABIN, A Miscellany, 1990, Cariadoc and Elizabeth, pg. 73.

Syrup of Pomegranate

Recipe:

3	cp	sugar
3	cp	pomegranate juice

Process:

Combine the sugar and pomegranate juice. Cook them down to a thick syrup.

Notes:

- 1) Dilute the resulting syrup to taste with hot water (3 to 6 parts water to 1 part syrup).
- 2) The syrup stores without refrigeration.
- 3) The recipe was translated by David Friedman (Cariadoc).

Source:

A Miscellany, 1990, Cariadoc and Elizabeth, pg. 74.

Traducción Española de un Manuscrito Anónimo del Siglo XIII Sobre La Cocina Hispano-Magribi, pg. 277

Syrup of Pomegranate

Take one pound of sour pomegranates and another of sweet and mix them with two pounds of sugar, and cooke to a syrup and watch it until the moment when it is necessary.

Syrup of Lemon

Recipe:

1	cp	sugar
1	cp	lemon juice

Process:

Combine the sugar and lemon juice. Cook them down to a thick syrup.

Notes:

- 1) Dilute the resulting syrup to taste with hot water (3 to 6 parts water to 1 part syrup).
- 2) Dilute the resulting syrup to taste with cold water and you get period lemonade.
- 3) The syrup stores without refrigeration.
- 4) The recipe was translated by David Friedman (Cariadoc).

Source:

A Miscellany, 1990, Cariadoc and Elizabeth, pg. 74.

Traducción Española de un Manuscrito Anónimo del Siglo XIII Sobre La Cocina Hispano-Magribi, pg. 279

Syrup of Lemon

Take lemon, after peeling off the outer peel, squeeze it and combine a pound of the juice with an equal amount of sugar; cook it until it takes the form of a syrup.

