

Mead Making

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The term honeymoon is traditionally explained as an allusion to the feelings of married couples to one another during the first moon cycle of their partnership - i.e. sweet. This is understandably so, but one may also consider that our Saxon ancestors would have drunk mead at wedding festivals which, it is rumoured lasted a whole month. The bride and Groom would be given a bottle of honey wine (Mead) and told to drink under the full moon giving rise to the term honeymoon. Hoping, to increase her fertility and her virility.

I adore mead and there is nothing tastier than a glass of well made vintage mead. Mead can be made from any type of food stuff it really all comes down to ones own imagination. My latest batch of chocolate and blueberry is excellent, but my “Tangerine Dream” is pure nectar.

Some of my finest meads have been by done by chance with out using the Hydrometer as well as not boiling the liquid at all. I am not advocating this. But if you do this method become your own guinea pig like me drink a whole bottle before giving it to friends.

Mead making is relatively simple but below are a few pointers that need to be adhered before starting:

- Equipment and products should be completely and sterilised at all times
- Always use first quality products
- It is important to make sure that the starting gravity is achieved
- Do not just leave it alone, make sure you revisit the brew and keep an eye its progress
- Do not force the process, good mead takes time

Basic equipment is all you need to get started:

Carboy or large plastic water bottle
Fermenting bucket 25lts
Large plastic bucket (brewing bucket) 25ltrs
Air lock (fermentation valve)
Rubber stopper bung
Wine Strainer
Racking siphon/cane
Hydrometer
Linen material to cover the mouth of the bucket
Cling film
Thermometer
Burco Boiler or large stainless steel saucepan
Bottles
Cork stoppers
Starter bottle 2 ltrs

Help the initial process by preparing a (feeder/starter) which is prepared 24 hours before starting to make mead.

Using a sterilised bottle. Mix 1 tsp of sugar to 1 tsp of yeast and place in a pint milk bottle half full of water. Leave in a warm area until fermented. This is known as a feeder/starter and should be added to the mead mix.

Basic Mixture of ingredients for all types of mead (about 1 gallon).

Brother Adam always suggested using 4 to 6 lbs of honey. Below 4lb the mead will not be of any quality. This is mixed with up to five pints of near-boiling water and bring the mixture to the boil and stirring all the time to avoid burning.

Although the heating does kill of some very important oils, it does kill the wild yeasts in the honey, which if allowed to self ferment could produce bad flavours.

- Allow the mixture to cool but during the cooling process, keep it covered up. Cling film is a good option.
- When the mixture has cooled, put it in a wide-open necked pre-sterilised container such as a brewing bucket. I find it is useful to have a container with the liquid amounts written on the side.
- The solution produced in the initial mixture needs to be diluted to the required initial specific gravity, see chart above.
- To achieve the required taste you require, adjust the mixture to the correct specific gravity.

Below is a chart which will enable good finished mead of different levels:

Mead Type	Initial Specific Gravity	Expected Final Specific Gravity	Alcohol Content
Dry	1.100	0.999	9-12%
Medium	1.118	1.010	12-15%
Sweet	1.127	1.025	12-15%

To achieve the required (desired type) initial specific gravity (I.S.G.) as per the chart:

The mixture should be well mixed using a sterilised spoon.

Take a pint sample from the mixture. Put a measure of the mixture in the in the hydrometer tube (leave plenty of room for when dipping the hydrometer in with it floats and does not make the liquid overflow).

- Make a note of the hydrometer reading and measure the level of the mixture in the hydrometer tube.
- Add water gradually to the tube until the required I. S.G. is achieved.
- Measure and make a note of the new height in the hydrometer tube.

The difference between the two heights will provide the ratio for the amount of water, which needs to be added to the main volume to bring it to the correct S.G.

- Adjust the mixture with water as per the ratio.
- Add an amount of citric, malic or tartaric acid powder and wine tannin powder as per the instructions but ensure the mixture is completely mixed.

- Taste the mixture to ensure it meets with your approval and only add a small amount at a time.
- Mix in the feeder/starter, which should now be working vigorously.
- Cover the vessel with a loose lid or a linen cover and leave in a warm place (65-70 F or 16-20 C) this should enable the initial fermentation to start.

The initial fermentation will be very vigorous; this is the reason for using a wide open container and a loose cover over the vessel. Do not overfill the container.

The first stage of the fermentation should take a week or more. During this period, stir the mixture vigorously each morning and night so as to introduce air. It will produce froth. But will stop the build up of gas on the bottom of the container. Although I find the best method would be to gently pour all the mixture from the brewing bucket into a clean sanitised clean bucket every day. This is the best way to maximise incorporating air into the mixture.

When that initial aggressive fermentation has slowed-down there is no need to stir any more. Transfer the mixture into a car boy or water bottle and place on a air lock.

TIP – rather than using water in the air lock, use a mixture of half water and half-liquid glycerine or potteen as that will prevent the air lock from drying up and help to prevent moulds growing..

Leave the mead to work (ferment) at its own pace. Do not rush it time is a wonderful recipe for mead. The factors that will control the rate of fermentation differ with each recipe but the temperature of the environment is a very important part of the process. Try to maintain about 65 F (16 C) and don't go above 70 F (20 C) or the yeast may be killed. Darkness is also good medicine for mead.

Just leave the mixture to ferment and monitor the process – time is the great brewer. When the process has slowed down dramatically, take a S. G. reading, using a sterilised wine thief have a taste to check if you are happy siphon or decant the mixture being careful not to disturb the “sludge” at the bottom into a sterilised and clean carboy then replace the stopper and air lock leaving the process to continue.

When all sign of fermentation has stopped, siphon or decant the product into a clean carboy. It should be palatable to drink at this stage. I maintain that the mead will improve over time i.e. the longer it is left, the better it will be. Brother Adam argues that a good mead takes 7 years, I must agree with him on this, however that does not say you that young mead is not delicious, as I have found also. It is quite possible to stop the process with Camden tablets; however I have preferred to let the mead run its course. I find it exciting to see the mead releasing one bubble a day.