

# BASIC MEAD MAKING METHOD

## Length of Time

Mead can take 1-2 years from the first day of making the recipe, to the day when it is bottled and sufficiently aged to drink. Pale (yellow) meads finish fermentation and age faster than red meads. Dry meads take longer to finish fermentation and to age than sweet meads with a 1-2 year minimum wait before drinking dry meads. Pale meads can be drunk anywhere from right after bottling, to 4-8 months of aging.

## Equipment

You really don't need any fancy equipment to make mead, these are the necessities:

- Bucket - same volume as carboy
- Carboy - can be smaller volume than bucket (glass is best), come in 1, 3, and 5 gallon sizes.
- Bung and Airlock - rubber plug with a plastic contraption
- Racking Tube - length of plastic tubing used to move liquid from one container into another using gravity
- Glass Wine Bottles and Corks - any bottle can be used or reused as long as it fits the cork and doesn't have a screw top
- Corker - can be found online or at a u-brew store

## Primary Fermentation

### **Ingredients:**

Collect all the ingredients for your chosen recipe - the most important ingredients which are necessary for all recipes are honey, yeast (wine, mead or champagne yeast), black tea for the tannin, and sliced lemon or orange for an acid.

### **Preparing the Honey:**

Pour the quantity of honey to be used into a stock pot, add water to fill up the rest of the pot. Allow to heat through stirring now and then, but don't let it come to a boil. This is done to kill the natural yeasts in the honey, which are unpredictable and can destroy your batch of mead. Heating, but not boiling keeps the flavour and consistency of the honey. The better quality honey you use, the better quality your mead will be. The best types of honey to use are fireweed and alfalfa. If you are using a dark rich recipe like a maple or a black currant, a dark buckwheat honey may be the best choice.

### **Assembling the Mead**

In your bucket, add the quantity of water or juice for your recipe, pour in the heated honey mixture. Depending on how many gallons, add 1-2 black tea bags, half a lemon or orange sliced up, any spices or herbs, and the fruit if you are using any in the recipe. If you are making a fruit mead, it is best to use frozen fruit as the cell membranes are broken down in the freezer and will allow the fruit to ferment

easier. If you are using freshly picked fruit or berries, you can wash them and then freeze them overnight the day before you make your mead. Mix everything together with a large spoon - or put on a rubber glove and use your hand. Make sure you take out the tea bags after a couple hours - too much tannin is bad.

When the mixture in the bucket has cooled to a lukewarm tepid temperature (this can take hours to overnight), scoop up some of the liquid in a bowl or measuring cup and add the yeast to this separate bowl. Mix with a fork and allow to sit for 15 minutes. If the yeast is alive, the mixture will be frothy and bubbly - this is good, you can now dump it into the bucket of mead. If the yeast is dead and the liquid remains unchanged, then either the yeast is bad or the mixture is still too hot - let the liquid cool a bit more then add a new yeast packet to the measuring cup and try again.

### **Babysitting the Primary Fermentation**

Once your recipe is mixed in the bucket, for the next 1-2 weeks stir it vigorously every day, even multiple times a day if you can, to aerate it and really get the fermentation going. Usually after the first week of vigorous stirring, the alcohol content is high enough to transfer the mead into a carboy. If you really want to be sure you can measure the alcohol content using a hydrometer available at wine shops.

### **Secondary Fermentation**

First of all you will need to clean your carboys and airlocks - you can use soap and bleach, or purchase sparklebright from a wine shop - it's a pink crystal powder and one tablespoon can clean up to 4 carboys. Soak the airlocks and bungs in the sink with sparklebright or soap and bleach. Then rinse them very well to get rid of any residue. Clean the carboy(s) in the bathtub along with the racking tube - everything must be completely sanitized to ensure success in making mead.

Secondly, you will need more honey and more water or juice before you can transfer the mead from bucket to carboy. Heat up the honey and have it ready.

Place the buckets on a countertop, scoop off the scum and fermenting fruit, take out anything that isn't liquid using a sieve as a scoop. Allow the buckets to sit for a few hours to overnight in order for any sediment to settle before racking.

When ready, place your clean carboy on the floor below the bucket, insert the solid end of the racking tube into the bucket and while squatting next to the carboy, suck on the other end of the tube until the mead starts pouring down into it - immediately place the end of the tube in the carboy - shove the end all the way to the base of the carboy - you want as little air to get in as possible. Hold the end of the racking tube in the bucket slightly above any sediment - you only want to transfer a slight amount of sediment - maybe a third of what's in the bucket. The sediment will aid in the fermentation, but too much will overwhelm it.

Once all the mead is transferred into the carboy, if there is any air space still left at the top of the carboy, fill it up with your honey-water or juice mixture, almost to the very top, but leave a few cm or an inch for the airlock. Now add the airlock - filled with water up to the line so air doesn't get in - push it in gently or it will get sucked into the carboy. And that's it, you're mead is officially in the secondary fermentation process. From now on all you will need to do is refill any evaporated water from the airlock, add more heated honey-water if the mead evaporates to top up the carboy and feed the yeast, or to rack the mead if the carboy is getting really dirty and in danger of growing mold. The racking

process is described below.

## **Racking Process**

Racking is done if the carboy is dirty and needs to be cleaned in the middle of fermentation, or if the yeast is running out of sugars to eat and the mead is getting too dry for your tastes. Place the carboy on a counter top overnight, allowing the sediment to settle. Grab the bucket used previously, or another carboy - either must be sanitized as well as the racking tube. Insert the racking tube into the carboy and suck the other end, in the same process described in the above section. Once the mead is transferred, clean out the carboy with soap and bleach or sparklebright, and a really good rinse or two afterwards to remove any residue. Then rack the mead back into the newly cleaned carboy, leaving space to add more heated honey-water to sweeten the mead.

Mead may never need to be racked, or it may need to be racked 3-5 times during the secondary fermentation - it depends on the aggressiveness of the yeast and the amount of sugars from fruits. If the carboy is clean and there is enough space to add more liquid, then you do not need to transfer the mead, just to top up the carboy with more heated honey. If you use fresh fruit instead of juice in your recipe, then it is more likely you will need to rack the mead multiple times.

## **Bottling**

### **Killing the Mead**

Some meads die on their own, others need to be killed. Keep an eye on the bubbles in the carboy. An easy way is to shine a flashlight near the top of the carboy to see the bubbles. If there are no bubbles at all, no movement, your mead is dead - just to be sure add a 1/4 tsp or so of yeast nutrient (available from a wine store). If the mead comes back to life, it's not ready to die yet. But if it stays dead then you can clarify it and get it ready for bottling. If your batch of mead simply will not die, but the bubbles have significantly slowed down - you can kill it with a chemical containing sulphites (available from a wine or u-brew shop). It's most likely you will always need to do this with a red mead. If you're allergic to sulphites you'll just have to wait a long time until the mead dies, probably a full year.

### **Clarifying**

There are two methods for clarifying mead - natural and chemical. For the chemical method, a clarifier can be bought from a wine or u-brew store containing fish bladders and shellfish or some such thing. Just add the required amount to the carboy and wait for 1 week before bottling.

For the natural method you will need 1 egg white for 5 gallons or 1/4 egg white per one gallon. Allow the egg to sit out for half a day to attain room temperature - the runnier the egg the better. Separate the yolk from the white and gently whisk the white until smooth - not frothy, no bubbles! Slip the egg white into your carboy and give it a shake or stir. Wait two weeks, then bottle once it clarifies straining out the egg whites.

You should be able to see right through a carboy of clarified mead, even a red. However, some meads like apple and apricot may never clarify.

### **Racking into Bottles & Corking**

You will need to once again place your mead on the counter and allow the sediment to settle. Make sure you have enough bottles (6 bottles per one gallon, 30 bottles per 5 gallon) and that they are well sanitized - running them through the dishwasher with no soap is good or sanitize them with bleach and water in the bathtub. Place all your clean bottles on the floor beneath the carboy. Sanitize your racking rod again and go through the same racking procedure, except this time you will be transferring the mead from the carboy to the bottles. Crimp the racking hose between bottles so as not spill or waste any mead.

Buy or borrow a corks - they can be bought at a u-brew shop or a supermarket for around \$50 or less. Get a bag of corks as well. It is best to kneel or sit on the floor and cork on the floor as it gives the best leverage, and results in less spillage. Corkers are usually pretty simple to use, just requiring brute force. If the dainty girly girls who come to my mead parties can do it, anyone can!

### **Aging**

Now you can label your mead in any way you choose - the date and flavour are the most important details. It's best stored in a cool dark place, either in boxes or a wine rack horizontally to moisten the cork. Mead has a shelf life of about 5 years. It is best drunk before then. Pale meads can last a year or two longer, but a red mead should be drunk before its 4-5 years old. This should not be a problem, I've yet to have my own meads reach past 2 years... damn festivals and sabbats.

I would advice against gifting "green" mead - many people don't understand that they have to wait until it's sufficiently aged to drink it and will tell you that you gave them an awful puke-tasting mead. I would only gift properly aged mead to avoid any issues. You will know your mead isn't ready to drink if it tastes slightly like vomit and the flavour hasn't developed yet.