Mead Making

The Wine Way

Part I of Two Parts

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Mead is not wine, as we know the term; wine is made from grapes. Mead is just exactly that, mead. True-to-the-name-mead is made from honey, water, plus a few chemicals and some yeast.

Often people make mead from beer yeast such as ale. I would like to put forth a recipe that makes mead with a higher alcohol percent. Using good wine yeast can insure mead that will last for years and age with the brilliance of any "big red" wine. For the beer maker, you must change your vocabulary a little; we are now making a must rather than a wart. I didn't confuse anyone, I hope; it's not too complicated.

Equipment for the production of a gallon of mead is very basic and costs very little, although you could buy gizmos and gadgets if you wanted to improve upon the art. For now, let's just keep it simple.

Supplies:
2 1-gallon glass containers - such as apple juice or vinegar comes in
1 rubber stopper - one that provides a tight fit and a hole in the middle
1 airlock

All the above-mentioned supplies may be found at any number of home brewing shops around the country. A list of these shops will be included at the end. You may find the yeast and chemicals that you need there also.

Honey, yeast and such:
3 lbs. honey
1 packet of any good wine yeast (Mead, Montrachet or Pasteur Champagne Yeast)
3 tsp. acid blend
1 tsp. yeast nutrient
1 crushed Campden tablet (optional, added safety against contamination of mead)

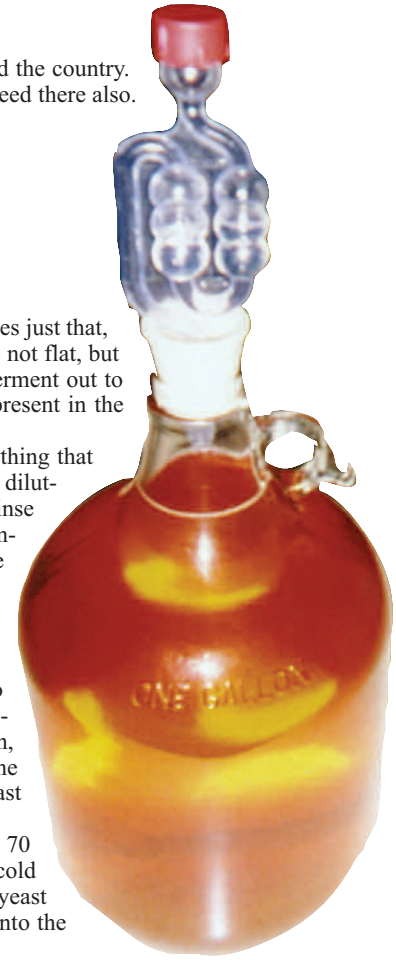
It is important to add the chemicals above for a few different reasons. The yeast nutrient provides just that, nutrients not found in honey. The acid blend provides some acidity so that the finished product is not flat, but has some bite. If either is excluded, you may end up with a flabby mead that takes months to ferment out to dryness. The Campden tablet is optional; its job is to kill bacteria and wild yeast that may be present in the must.

Before we get started actually making the mead, let me talk about cleanliness. Sterilize everything that encounters the mead. Cleaning the stopper, airlock and gallon container with a solution of either diluted bleach or ammonia is essential. Do not use soap, as soap leaves a residue that is undesirable. Rinse all equipment before using, so that not even a molecule of ammonia or bleach remains. To put cleanliness in perspective, making mead is like trying to prepare hamburgers three months in advance and not allowing any bacteria to grow on the meat. A large amount of bacteria in mead causes a defective, unpleasant tasting solution.

Okay, I have explained why and what, now let's get into the how. Mix the honey and 3 quarts of water into a clean pot--a very clean pot. If the pot is not clean, it can pick up the flavor of whatever has been in the pot before; example: chicken noodle soup. Slowly bring the honey-water to boil, not allowing any of the honey to burn. After a few minutes of boiling, a meringue-like substance forms; using a spoon, remove as much of it as possible. This meringue is a protein, pollen, and bee-part mixture, which will cause a haze in the finished product if not removed. Allow the honey-water mixture to continue to boil for about 10 more minutes. The boiling kills any wild yeast and bacteria.

After boiling, allow the honey-water mixture (now known as a "must") to cool at least to 70 degrees or perhaps 65 degrees--whatever room temperature happens to be. Placing the pot in cold water will greatly hasten the cooling process. After the must has cooled, mix in acid blend and yeast nutrient. If you would like to add the crushed Campden tablet, now is the time. Pour the must into the gallon container (possibly using a funnel, clean of course) and place on airlock. Leave for 24 hours.

The airlock will need water added to make it work. The whole principle of the airlock is to allow inside gases out, while allowing no outside air in. For safety, it may be wise to crush one Campden tablet and mix with 1/2 quart of water; use the Campden water to fill the airlock. The benefit of filling the airlock with the mixture rather than regular water is that no bacteria can



Small-scale mead making setup. In the photo is a one-gallon glass jug, rubber stopper and airlock poistioned on top.

grow in the airlock. Seal the remaining Campden water in a jar for later use. The rubber stopper with the hole in the middle, as you may have figured out, holds the airlock in place while making an airtight seal.

You have waited patiently for around 24 hours. Now is the time to add the yeast that turns the honey-water-chemical-mix or must into mead. Add yeast in the recommended dosage, usually a teaspoon or so to be safe. If the yeast you receive is a dry powder, mix the yeast in 1/4 cup of lukewarm water, stir and leave for a few minutes so that the yeast is reconstituted, then add. Stir the whole mix. Replace airlock. Note: Do not use baking yeast that you buy at the grocery store; this will produce a mess rather than alcohol.

Fermentation will explode in a matter of hours after adding the yeast. The airlock will start venting the gas (carbon dioxide) made from the fermentation process. In a few weeks you will start to notice sediment forming on the bottom of the container—known as "lees" in winemaking. Lees are pieces of miscellaneous particles and dead yeast. When a good coating forms, say a little less than 1/2 inch, it is a good idea to "rack" the mead off the lees. Racking, a siphoning process, takes the clear liquid off the sediment (for a small task such as a gallon, some very clean aquarium hose will do). Place the mead on a counter and a clean gallon container (like used before) lower, say on a stool. The principle, as most of you know, is to allow gravity to pull the liquid down. Place one end in the mead, not allowing the end to touch the sediment. Take the other end and sip on it as you would a straw to start siphoning the mead down. Before it gets to your mouth, put the end in the clean container. This should start the mead running down; keep a watch on the end in the mead above and adjust it, so that it never takes in air and never touches the sediment. Finally, you will get down to a point that you can't get anymore without agitating sediment; disregard the lees that are left. Replace the airlock on the newly racked mead and leave until the next racking when sediment forms again, usually 2-3 months later right before bottling.

It will take approximately three to four months to ferment the mead out to dryness; dryness occurs when there's no sugar left to ferment. Few bubbles will rise from the bottom of the mead, it will clear, and the water in the airlock will no longer be moving after complete fermentation. Now is the time to bottle, part two of this series will describe bottling in full detail.

Lastly, it is important to keep the mead, while fermenting, in a dark place that is warm, not exceeding 80 degrees. Remember that it takes a while for mead to ferment, don't be discouraged, your work will be rewarded in the end. Try your mead when it finishes fermenting; bottle and save for a year, then try. Mead becomes better with age.

Brew Shops:

The Beverage Company
2990 East St.
Anderson, CA
Ph: (530) 365-4371
www.winemakingbrewingco.com

Heart's Home Beer & Wine Making Supply
5824 North Orange Blossom Trail
Orlando, FL
Ph: 1-800-392-8322
www.heartshomebrew.com

Great Fermentations of Indiana
1712 East 86th St.
Indianapolis, IL
Ph: 1-888-463-2739

Beer & Wine Hobby
155 New Boston St., Unit T
Woburn, MA
Ph: 1-800-523-5423
www.beer-wine.com

New York Homebrew, Inc.
33 East Jericho Turnpike
Mineola, NY
Ph: 1-800-YOO-BREW

Austin Homebrew Supply
306 East 53rd. St.
Austin, TX
Ph: 1-800-890-BREW
www.austinhomebrew.com

The Cellar Homebrew
Dept. BR 14411 Greenwood Ave. N.
Seattle, WA
Ph: 1-800-342-1871
www.cellar-homebrew.com

The Brew Hut
15108 East Hampden Ave.
Aurora, CO
Ph: 1-800-730-9336
www.thebrewhut.com

City Beverage Home Brewing Shop
915 Burke St.
Winston-Salem, NC
Ph: (336) 722-2774
www.citybeverage.com