

MEAD MAKING



THE WINE WAY

Part II Bottling

by CHRISTOPHER PETREE
Yadkinville, NC



By now the mead's bubbling away, making strange sounds and smelling more like alcohol. Eventually, the work of the yeast will cease and everything will become quiet. The water in the airlock will be on an even keel with few bubbles rising from the bottom. At this point it has been three months, give or take, maybe longer if you didn't add the yeast nutrient. It's about time to bottle the finished product for aging and, in most cases, drinking.

Bottling itself is not complicated, but it can be made into a hectic endeavor if the correct equipment is not utilized. A hand-held or plunger style corker makes bottling much easier than trying to cork with a rubber mallet (believe me, I tried the mallet, and it's not something I recommend). Many types of corkers exist, from the elaborate bench models to the hand held. However, for mead makers like us, a \$15.00 plunger model will do. You can find many variations at any homebrew shop. If you have a wine making friend, borrow his.

When buying corks remember—quality first—don't skimp because of price. Don't reuse corks, corks are only meant to be used once. Buy real corks, not a synthetic variation. Generally, #9 or #8 corks will fit standard wine bottles.

The bottles, usually found at restaurants and recycling plants for little to no cost, are the next items to obtain. For small batches such as a gallon, many people buy smaller wine bottles that are only half the size of a standard bottle. It is important that you find wine bottles, which require a cork.

Wash the wine bottles in a diluted bleach or ammonia solution, never soap, and rinse thoroughly. Remove traces of any substance that may be present in the bottles. Cleaning the bottles is important, since the bottles will be home to the mead for an extended period. Turn the bottles upside down and allow the water to drain. The number of bottles you need may vary. If you use the standard size, 2-3 should be enough; if you use the half size, double the number. The bottles need to be prepared close to the approximate time the corks are ready.

To prepare the corks, place the amount needed, plus two or three extras (in case there's an accident), in a pot of water. Boil the corks for a few minutes, usually 3-4 minutes. Submerge the corks under water by placing a saucer, smaller than the pot, on top. Soak the corks for 4 hours or overnight.

When everything's ready, clean the siphoning tube with the same bleach or ammonia solution used in cleaning the bottles, then rinse the bottles thoroughly. The tube transfers the mead into the bottle, using the same technique as in racking.

Now is the moment we have been building up to—bottling time. The equipment is sterilized and ready, now it's a matter of siphoning the mead into the bottles. Fill the bottles so that there's 1/2" of air space between the mead and the approximate end of the cork. The cork, once placed, should be flush with the rim of the bottle. Remember not to allow the end of the tube in the mead to touch the sediment.

Placing corks is work; it requires some force. It may be wise to practice on some empty bottles before actually corking the bottles with mead. Nevertheless, like all things, with practice it becomes easier. If you seat the cork wrong, remove it with a corkscrew and try again. The extra corks that were prepared will come in handy when this happens.

Rinse all the bottles with cool water after bottling then label. Labeling mead is a valuable tool in determining the age of the mead later; write the year the mead was bottled and possibly the type of honey used. When finished, place the bottles in a cool, dark, cellar-like atmosphere. Leave the bottles on their side so that the mead is in contact with the cork. Small droplets of mead will form on the end of the cork; this will disappear in a few days when the cells in the cork absorb a small amount of mead. If it doesn't, the bottle may need to be recorked.

Some say that mead tastes best after it has aged for five years; put a bottle up and see for yourself. Make another batch like described in the previous article, or find a wine-making book and learn the details that obviously can't be written about here. For the interested, a whole world has opened-up making mead, wine or beer. Mead-making is almost as interesting as beekeeping, nearly. Have fun and enjoy your creations!



**Use premium corks
for mead-making.**