The Newbee Guide to Making Mead - Chapter 2: Honey

Contributed by
Thursday, 15 December 2005
Last Updated Saturday, 13 June 2009

Let me start here by providing one bit of advice: the better the ingredients, the better the Mead. You can make some very nice Meads using supermarket bought processed Clover honey and bread Yeast (check out Joe’s Ancient Orange and Spice recipe in the Chapter 6), but the results will be average at best. Starting this way is cheap and easy, allowing you to get a taste of what could be, without putting a dent in the wallet should the batch go south. As you start to use better ingredients, you will notice that the quality of the Mead will improve and you can begin to formulate recipes that are built around the unique honey flavor itself.

Top of the list of ingredients is the Honey. After all, without this, it is not Mead. Honey comes in a huge variety of flavors depending on the flower source the nectar was gathered from. Each varietal adds its own flavor, aroma, complexity, and body to the Mead. They can be used individually, or mixed to layer the flavors and create a whole new taste. Some honeys are very light and do well in straight Meads or with very subtle and delicate fruit flavors. Others bring with them great complexity that complements stronger ingredients while not being overwhelmed by them. Taste as many honeys as you can to get an idea of what they have to offer your Mead.

Note – No Beekeeper has yet found a way to train his bees to go only to a specific type of flower, so the honey is still a mixture of different nectars from different sources. The varietal receives its name from the predominant flower near where the hive was located. See Appendix 1 for a list of the most common varietals available.

Honey has some very special characteristics that aid the Mead maker. For example, it is a super-saturated sugar solution, which means it has a very low moisture content (most honey only has between 14 – 18% water). Since most bacteria require a higher moisture content to grow, honey is naturally resistant to bacterial infection. This increases its shelf life up to 2 years (recommended by the National Honey Board, although longer storage can be achieved with proper containers and cooler environments), allowing larger quantities to be purchased and stored for future use. The ideal storage temperature for honey is between 64-75ºF. Honey also has a natural acidity, around pH 3.9, which helps to create the ideal environment for the yeast once it is dissolved in water. Research has also shown that honey, when added to an acidic solution, decreased the sourness perception up to 75%, which makes it perfect for smoothing out those overly sour Meads where the other ingredients are acidic, such as lemons, or too much acid blend was added.

There are some aspects of honey that do require some extra handling, so attention needs to be paid to the state it is in. Because of the high sugar content, honey has a habit of crystallizing and turning hard, particularly at cooler temperatures. This not only makes it harder to use, but the water sometimes separates out on top of the crystals, creating an area high enough in moisture to allow bacteria or yeast to grow. If you have some honey in this state, consider the pasteurizing methods described in Chapter 12 to ensure no unwanted spoilage organisms get into your Mead. For honey that has crystallized, heat it gently by placing the container in warm water. Do not microwave or overheat the honey as this will make it lose some of its unique floral quality.

Finally, honey comes in a number of different forms aside from the liquid or crystallized ones. For example, whipped honeys (also known as Cremed, Spun, Churned, Candied, or Fondant) have all been processed to crystallize and lighten them, making it easier to spread. These can all be used, but tend to be more expensive and harder to handle. If you do decide to use a whipped honey, just make sure no other unwanted ingredients have been added, such as preservatives or oils.
[Return to INDEX]