

Mead Making 101 with Marissa Percoco

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Mead...the ambrosia of the gods!

Delve into the ancient art of mixing honey--the nectar of the flowers of plants gathered by the bees--with local fruit, flowers, roots & herbs to create divine expressions of beverage bliss. This hands-on event will guide participants through the process of harvesting ingredients and preparing them for the mead, discussing basic qualities of flowers, fruits, roots, etc. & how to handle & use them. Then we'll blend these things together with water & honey, feeding the wild yeasts, to create the beginnings of a most delightful beverage! This is an introductory class, so we will briefly discuss ratios of sweetener, the qualities of various sugars, & have an overview of wild & cultured fermentation. We'll end with a brief discussion on racking, bottling & storing your brews while sampling a few lovely examples of fermentation and alchemical magic!

Some things to consider:

-Whenever I mention water, know that I am referring to live water, well water, or water that has been dechlorinated; this means that if you only have access to city tap water, it is important to boil it or pour it into a wide mouth vessel (like a 5 gallon food grade bucket) & let stand uncovered for 24 hours. The chlorine in city water can hinder your yeasts well being, causing less active fermentation.

-When harvesting plant materials from urban areas, always check to be sure you are not harvesting from areas that are treated with pesticides, fungicides, herbicides, dog excrete, or otherwise fouled by humans. When wild harvesting, ALWAYS practice ethical harvesting; if you do not know what this means for each specific plant (because it can be very different) then do not harvest; first educate yourself about the plants by forming a relationship with them & getting to know their ways. Only then are you ready to harvest....

- A word about honey...I use Haw Creek Honey here in Asheville, but as I travel I seek the local, raw unrefined honey from each locale I spend time in; imbued with the essence of the place, local honey really is a magickal substance. Always acquire honey from organic and (where possible) wild places; obtaining honey from farms that are heavily treated with chemicals will yield a honey less pure than honey grazed on organic farms or in wild areas. Remember, bees can wander up to 5 miles seeking nectar; consider where the bees roam who make your honey...

-Please, wherever you are in your brewing saga, begin a Brewing Journal, a book dedicated to what you brew; record the moon phases, ingredients & where they're from, who was present, plus the dates of racking & bottling...you'll be glad you did when you can look back over 10 years of notes & marvel at your creations!

I. Harvesting & Preparing Your Ingredients : *" Just feel the magic in the air and the power in the breeze, feel the energy of the plants, the bushes and the trees. Let yourself be surrounded by nature at its best. Calm yourself, focus and let magic do the rest." – Sally Walker*

A. Raw : flowers, fruits with pectins, delicate materials

a. With fruit, use organic when possible; if wild fermenting, be sure not to wash your fruits, as they are covered in the wild yeasts which you want to get your brew bubbling!; if chemically treated, peel the skins. Also remove any deep bruises that have begun to mold.

B. Infusion : soft stems, leaves, herbs, sometimes fruit & tough or medicinal flowers

a. Infusion is the process of extracting chemical compounds or flavors from plant material in a solvent such as water, by allowing the material to remain suspended in the solvent over time. Most commonly I will bring water to a boil, then pour it over the plant material and let it cool; this can be for hours or even over night. With some materials it is important to infuse for short periods of time, 8-10 minutes. I then strain off the liquid & use this for brewing.

C. **Decoction** : woody stems, bark, roots, mushrooms, lichens, tough materials or materials with their medicinal compounds strongly bound within their fibers.

a. In herbalism, decoctions are usually made to extract fluids from hard plant materials by boiling in water and straining. I will often have a large pot of plant materials on the back of the wood stove, simmering away for days. In warmer months, I will conserve energy by bringing the pot to a boil, then turning it off, letting it cool, then repeating--sometimes for days--depending on the desired strength of the decoction. I then strain off the liquid & use this for brewing.

II. HONEY !!! *"Bees are the messengers of the gods, bringing the sacred to human beings, with a kinship to the soul essence that all people possess."* Stephen Harrod Buhner

Basic Recipe for Excellent Mead

a. In general, use 1 quart (3 #'s) of honey per gallon of liquid (water, tea, juice, etc.). This can be modified a bit, for instance, if brewing with sugar laden fruits, you can use less honey, or for a lower alcohol %, use less; for higher use a little more, but be aware: there is a maximum threshold the yeasts can handle, and extra sweetener after that will result in a cloyingly sweet beverage. Dissolve honey in warm— NOT HOT— liquid, or stir thoroughly into cool liquid.

b. Sugar (preferably organic Florida Crystals) can be used at a rate of 3 to 6 cups per gallon of liquid, again depending on ingredients (sugar laden fruit?), desired alcohol content & desired fermentation time. I make yummy lightly alcoholic beverages with fresh fruit in the summer for picnics in 2 weeks with 3 cups of sugar & a few handfuls of fresh fruit; this is not designed for long term storage or high alcohol, but is a wonderful fizzy beverage chilled in the river on a hot day!

c. Molasses, sorghum, rice syrup and other sweeteners all have wonderful flavors & textures. Experiment in 1 gallon batches, keeping detailed notes, and when you hit on something you love, repeat!

III . Yeast!!! Yeasts are everywhere; their conquest of the world is complete. *" [They] travel on dust, in the air. In cold climates [they] can winter over, if need be, in the ground, and then take to the air again in the spring, traveling on anything that flies...One variety of wild yeast colonizes the wax bloom right on the skin of the grapes. Kind of like a message from [the gods]."* --Dale Pendell

A. Wild or Open Fermentation

This is a simple process whereby the natural yeasts that are all around and on everything are introduced to the love of their lives, namely-sugars, and the most natural thing imaginable happens—true love, in the form of fermentation! Thus producing alcohol...yay! Fruits, flowers, ginger, and the honey itself are all teaming with yeast; this is why we do not boil many of these things; or if we do, adding a bit of raw turmeric or ginger root (always organic, as non-organic is often irradiated which has been shown to kill the natural yeast colonies) back into the cooled down liquid is good practice. Then we stir, stir, stir in the beginning, as **yeast needs air to reproduce**; this is the biggest mistake beginner's make: not stirring their brand new brews enough; I often leave my wild ferments in a food grade bucket with a brew lid for the first 3-7 days, depending on ambient temperatures. This allows me to capture the yeasts in the air as I stir the heck out of my new meads. Then, once fermentation is established & the liquid is bubbling away, I transfer into a glass carboy with a vapor lock.

B. Cultured Yeasts

This process involves using commercially produced yeast strains available from brewing supply stores which are sprinkled atop the tea & honey solution, then vapor locked immediately. They are fairly predictable and can be useful for unsticking a stalled fermentation, or for bringing out subtle qualities of

various ingredients. D-47, by Lavlin is a favorite among many mead makers, as is EC-1118 for more bubbly brews. Follow packet directions when using.

IV. Combining Honey & Water...the Alchemy of Magic! *"But of all these substances, the oldest is mead. Throughout human history, oral tradition, and legend, it is connected to a change in consciousness of humankind—a change that brought with it the beginnings of a peculiar form of art encoded in language and called poetry."* --Stephen Harrod Buhner

A. Now you have your gallon of warm plant infused liquid, your quart of honey and a big pot, with a clean food grade bucket (wild fermenting) or a 1 gallon glass jug, a yeast packet & a vapor lock (cultured fermenting) all ready; for cultured fermentation, simply stir in the honey thoroughly & transfer to the glass jug, pop on the vapor lock, and *voila* ...Magick! For wild fermenting, pour tea into the bucket, add the honey & stir, stir, stir! I like to stir 3 x's per day for 5 minutes or so, or 10 x's for 2 minutes; think bio-dynamics, stirring in the ethers in a vortex of magick, 250 x's in each direction...you get the point! Oxygen is essential in the early stages of fermentation. Once bubbling is active (3-7 days depending on temp.) transfer to a clean glass container & vapor lock.

B. For fruit infusions, simply dissolve honey (or sugar for a country wine) in water & float fruit in liquid for 24 hours; strain into clean glass vessel, then cap with a vapor lock.

V. Time

A. At this point, you have some beautiful concoctions in glass...what now? Well, you could have yourself a new wine party in a week or two; or you could wait a month & rack your creation, which means siphoning off the clearish liquids off of the dregs on the bottom, from one glass container to another, then topping with a strong honey or sugar solution, vapor locking and continuing this process for awhile. Some folks rack religiously on the full moon; some rack once at six months, then bottle at one year...there are as many ways to do this as there are folks doin' it! Each has its benefits & draw backs; 2 week old "New Wine" can be mighty tasty, & it is so simple with so much less work; but I warn you, the worst hang overs I have ever had are from this new wine!!! Conversely, some of the best Meads I've had the pleasure of tasting are 5 to 10 years old--there's definitely something to be said for aging; but that is a lot of handling and storing; whatever method you choose, enjoy yourself!

B. A Word About Bottles: When choosing longer term storage than the New Wine method (meaning drinking straight from the jug), you have some options. Your local brew store can outfit you with a capper and a bunch of caps for less than \$20; this is a good option because beer bottles are readily available from recycling bins everywhere & come in a variety of sizes. Most importantly, beer bottles are high pressure glass, meaning they won't explode as easily as wine bottles will, which are designed to hold dry or finished alcohol that is done bubbling completely. Pop-tops or bale tops (like Grolsch) are excellent, and champagne bottles are the highest pressure glass. Store your brews in cool dark places, as heat increases activity & can cause popping. Label well, as over time, batches get confused & it will be difficult to announce your Mead at a Mead Circle if you're not labelled well! Enjoy your new found passion and this age old art...cheers!

"It is so ancient a beverage that the linguistic root for mead, "medhu," is the same in all Indo-European languages where it encompasses an entire range of meanings, which include "honey," "sweet," "intoxicating," "drunk," and "drunkenness." For this reason it has been suggested that fermented honey may be the oldest form of alcohol known to man."

--Mikal Aasved, 1988

"Mead is the ancient liquor of gods and men, the giver of knowledge and poetry, the healer of wounds, and the bestower of immortality."

--Robert Gayre, 1948