



On-Tap

Greg Evans

Mead

It's been called "Ambrosia", the "Food of the Gods" and the "Drink of Lovers." Some have argued that this unique fermented alcoholic beverage - made of honey, water and yeast - has been brewed longer than any other. Whatever the case, this drink, believed to be the giver of courage and wisdom, has long been part of the human story with roots likely stretching back thousands of years.

Historical evidence suggests that mead was produced throughout Asia, Central Africa, and on the Island of Crete thousands of years ago. The ancient Greeks embraced it wholeheartedly and it became central to celebrations of all kinds. For them, fermented honey was an entheogen (could lead to divine inspiration) while bees were sacred to Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and the bringer of seasons.

Mead was especially popular in Northern Europe at one time and was often produced by monks in regions where grapes could not be grown successfully, and before the importation of inexpensive wine. This may have had a direct correlation to the fact that some Christian saints were particularly partial to a drop of mead. Perhaps best known of this group is Saint Findian who lived on bread and water all week only to "push the boat out" on Sundays when he indulged on mead and salmon.

It was also central to the mythology of a number of cultures and was the favourite drink of Norse heroes and gods. Mere mortals too could benefit from its legendary effects. Long renowned as an aphrodisiac, the word honeymoon is said to be derived from the ancient Norwegian custom of having newly-weds consume mead for a whole moon (or month) thus increasing their fertility and the chances of a fulfilled marriage. On a more practical note, mead was also considered a medicinal liquor as herbs with healing or restorative properties could be "stored" in the liquid and thus made available over the winter months. You could also make the conjecture that it made some herbs easier to swallow!

Just as there are a multitude of stories about the importance of mead in many of the world's cultures, so too are the variations of the venerable drink itself. The brewer of mead practices the art of Meadhing (pronounced meth'ing) and has a rich palate of varieties to choose from when producing this separate and distinct family of alcoholic beverages.

A mead containing herbs such as lavender or oregano, or spices such as nutmeg and cloves, is called Metheglin. Add fruit such as strawberries, blackcurrants or blueberries, and you have Melomel, while the addition of apples will produce Cyser. Grape lovers are not left out either. The mead called Pymment is a blend of red or whiter grapes with honey for a unique, subtle flavour. One can produce either a Great Mead or a Short Mead; the former intended to be aged for several years like a vintage wine, the latter made from a recipe meant to age quickly.

Local meadhing and fellow CAMRA member Bill McDowell, who produces mead for family and friends, brewed his first batch in 1978 and has never looked back. "What I really enjoy about mead is the delicate flavours that linger through the palate after each and every sip," says Bill, who currently plans to make a variety that includes orange and ginger. Bill stresses the importance of quality ingredients and patience, "You should let it age like a good single malt Scotch - and then be sure to share it. It's a social drink that always seems to lead to good conversation."

I have had the pleasure of sampling Bill's homemade mead and recall its smoothness and warming quality. Did it give me courage or wisdom? Probably not...but I did, like the saints of old, feel a little closer to heaven!

Greg Evans is the Executive Director of the Maritime Museum of B.C. and a brewing historian.

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