

## The Basics of Mead

*Mention mead to a random person off the street and you'll likely conjure up images of Vikings, Beowulf, or sugar-induced stomach aches. However common, these views of the beverage really sell it short. Mead and its many variants have a truly satisfying range of flavors and sweetness levels.*

### What exactly is mead, anyway?

Even those that have a narrow understanding of mead usually know that it's a form of honey wine. That much is true. The term "mead" is used to refer to a fermented, alcoholic beverage made from honey diluted with water. Most commercially-made examples are between 7% and 22% alcohol by volume or more.

### How is it made?

To make mead, the honey that will provide the sugar necessary for fermentation is first diluted with water. At this point, some mead makers then heat this mixture, known as "must," in order to pasteurize it, killing unwanted wild yeast and bacteria. Many producers prefer to leave their must unpasteurized (heating the must can boil off aroma), instead relying on honey's natural anti-microbial qualities to inhibit bacterial growth. After dilution, (and cooling, if the must has been pasteurized) yeast and fermentation-aiding nutrients are added. The concentration of honey prior to fermentation and the type of yeast used will dictate how much of the honey-derived sugar will be fermented out and thus how much alcohol is created and how much sweetness is left behind. If the mead maker so desires, fermentation can be stopped prematurely with additives that halt yeast activity, allowing the mead maker to lock in a level of residual sweetness and alcohol. This also allows for additional post-fermentation sweetening to occur. Does all this sweetness sound a little tough to swallow? Despite the beverage's reputation for being universally sickly sweet, mead is commonly made very dry. Honey is highly fermentable and it's possible to leave a finished mead with very little residual sugar. Sweeter variants exist, of course, and most bottles are labeled to indicate the level of sweetness.

After fermentation and any post-fermentation sweetening, the mead is ready for packaging. If a still mead is desired, no further steps are necessary--the filled bottle or keg can be sealed and aged until it is ready for consumption. Prefer bubbles? Some fully fermented dry meads can be naturally carbonated. To do so, they are packaged with an additional dose of sugar, kick-starting another fermentation within the bottle. This creates carbonation, as the carbon dioxide produced by the fermentation has nowhere to escape and is absorbed into the liquid. Carbonation can also be achieved by injecting a finished mead (with any level of remaining sweetness) with pressurized carbon dioxide until it is absorbed.

Either way, once the mead is packaged, it is aged prior to sale to mellow out harsh fermentation character. Most commercial meads are aged for at least a few months, and some producers (especially home mead makers that don't need to quickly move inventory to survive) insist on aging their mead for years prior to consumption.

### Mead Variants

The range of flavors that can be expressed in simple, traditional, unaltered meads is huge. Single-flower honeys are used to present different flavors from variations in the honey itself and fermentation character can add further depth. But it doesn't stop there. Mead makers produce countless variants on the basic mead formula by including herbs, spices, fruit juices and other adjuncts and additives. Each variant seems to have its own cool-sounding old school name. Here are just a few:

**Melomel:** the generic term applied to any type of mead made with fruit.

**Cyser:** a melomel made with apple juice.

**Pyment:** another melomel, hybridizing wine and mead. Made with grape juice or fruit.

**Braggot:** a beer and mead hybrid, made with malt and hops.

**Metheglin:** the broad category of meads made with herbs or spices.

**Tej:** an Ethiopian mead made with gesho root and fermented with wild yeast.