


Sky River Mead



Mead – Beer or Wine?

Mead...perhaps the oldest alcoholic beverage known to man. Mead pre-dates both beer and vinifera wine, and is simply fermented honey. But, the debate continues – is it beer or wine? The simple answer is that mead is mead, just as cider is cider. A more complete answer is that mead is wine, or specifically, honeywine. To understand this answer requires a look at some of the history of mead, and the nature of honey.

To make mead requires three basic ingredients – honey, water and yeast. In nature, the bees concentrate the sugars in honey in order to preserve the honey. Water must be added to the honey to bring the sugars to an acceptable level for the yeast to ferment them effectively. After the water and honey are blended, the mead ferments out in precisely the same way a vinifera wine would.

The confusion between brewing and fermenting mead comes both from the very nature of honey, and our own resourcefulness.

First, the nature of honey. The juice of a grape is protected by the skin of the grape. For this reason, a grape left on a kitchen counter will rot long before it can ferment. Honey is exactly the opposite. Honey is exposed to the environment until the bees cap it off with wax – the very last thing that they do. Consequently, raw honey contains dust, pollen and wild yeast from the air. Wild yeast, left unchecked, can lead to unpredictable fermentations – either very good, or bad.

This brings us to the second factor, our resourcefulness. Over time, early meadmakers learned that they could achieve a more predictable, controllable and rewarding fermentation if the honey-water was boiled prior to fermentation. What they were effectively doing was killing off the wild yeast. Boiling honey-water looked similar to boiling a beer wort, even though the purpose was dissimilar. It was at that point we began calling the process “brewing mead”, and the confusion was begun. In addition to the confusion around process, super-heating any sugar tends to caramelize it, darkening colors, flavor and aromas. To balance these dark caramel qualities, old world meads were left with very high residual sugars, and had numerous herbs added as background notes. This resulted in a drink that had both an appearance and a mouthfeel closer to that of a Stout, than that of a Chardonnay. Thus the confusion deepened.

The points of confusion are easy to see, but in the end it has been simply that – confusion. Even history and mythology has reinforced the confusion. It is, after all, much easier to imagine a Viking pounding back a pitcher of beer, than sipping on a refreshing Pinot Grigio. But, the latter is closer to the truth. All meads, or honeywines, are fermented. They are wines.

At Sky River, as we are reintroducing the world to mead, we keep heat as far from our honey as we possibly can. By avoiding the challenges presented by super-heating our honey, we are able to ferment our wines down to delicate levels and still fully enjoy the qualities of the honeys we work with. Our meads retain the honeyed essence of their foundation – the floral nose, and the melon and tree fruit notes of the fruits that the flowers and nectar prelude. Mead has always been fermented. Mead has always been a wine. Sky River Meads strive to be both true to tradition, and true to the lifestyles and palates of today. Slainte!