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Dan Bates / The Herald [\(click to enlarge\)](#)

Denice Ingalls of Sky River Brewing in Sultan talks about making mead, also known as honey wine. The company used stainless vats made for brewing beer because mead doesn't have pulp and skins like grapes.

Sultan brewer leads honey wine revival

By [Amy Rolph](#)

Herald Writer

Ironically, Denice Ingalls discovered mead on a dry college campus.

She first came across the ancient honey wine in English literature classes at Pepperdine University in California -- "Beowulf" and the writings of Chaucer abound with mentions of the drink. But she never imagined that years later, she'd be running one of the most prolific meaderies in the nation.

After all, mead went out of fashion centuries ago -- didn't it?

Don't be so sure. When Ingalls started making Sky River mead 10 years ago from her father-in-law's honey processing plant in the Cascade foothills, there were just a handful of meaderies in the country. Most were in upstate New York, and they could be easily counted on one set of hands.

Now, Sky River Brewing is one of a growing number of mead producers, and the Sultan-based meadery has distribution throughout the Northwest and as far away as Kyoto, Japan.

Mead is undergoing a reincarnation, evolving past its roots in ancient Greek and Viking traditions. Centuries ago, European mead was a dark, sweet heavy drink -- different from the pale golden liquid Sky River bottles year-round.

Old-style mead isn't culturally relevant anymore, Ingalls said. Unless, of course, you spend a lot of time lounging around a library in an overstuffed leather chair with an Irish wolfhound at your feet.

"That's not how we live," she said. "If you don't live that way, the wine is going to be, at best, a pretty ornament."

Sky River distributes three honey wines: dry, semi-sweet and sweet. A fruited mead is due to hit shelves soon.

"Sweet honey wine -- ancient drink of kings and poets," one bottle label reads.

"The sweet mead was really sort of a tribute to history," Ingalls said. "It's not the way King Arthur would have drank it, but we don't eat the way King Arthur ate."

She said Sky River meads pair well with foods that sometimes clash with grape wines, such as Indian curries or Thai dishes. The sweet mead is reminiscent of a dessert wine, and the dry mead works well with poultry or game.

Recent years have seen a surprising number of new wineries open in Washington. More than 600 are licensed, doubling the number there were when Sky River opened in 1999.

Alcohol sales are usually countercyclical in a waning economy, and that trend seems to be mostly holding true during the current recession. Take-out bottle sales and consumption were up in 2008, according to data released last week by the Connecticut-based Beverage Information Group. But growth wasn't as pronounced as it was in past years, and consumers aren't splurging on expensive drinks.

Complicating things further, wine and beer distributors are consolidating to better weather economic pressures. That means a tougher market for small breweries and wineries.

Sky River hasn't felt the pinch too harshly, Ingalls said. They produce 3,000 cases annually, capitalizing on the advantage of selling an unusual product with little, if any, local competition.

"Right now is not the time I want to be going into a grocery store and trying to convince them that my chardonnay is better than your chardonnay," Ingalls said.

Sky River mead usually retails for about \$12 a bottle. Most specialty wine shops carry Sky River products, as do regional supermarkets such as Top Foods, Haggen, Whole Foods and QFC.