



The Need for Mead

Honey wines rooted in North Carolina pay homage to local harvests **By Corbie Hill**

**STARRLIGHT
MEAD BOTTLES
ON A BOTTLE TREE
AT THE STORE
IN PITTSBORO**

**PHOTO BY
ALEX BOERNER**

Old habits die hard, and mead is one of the oldest.

There's no clear consensus on where this most ancient of fermented beverages originated. The Chinese and Egyptians both drank it thousands of years ago. Becky Starr of Starrlight Mead in Pittsboro guesses that the first fermentation was probably an accident. Honey is 80 percent sugar, she explains, and will keep and keep unless it's diluted.

“If you had honey in a jar and then you filled the jar with water, the honey and the water would mix and then yeast from the air would get in there and create alcohol,” she explains, sitting in the meadery on a quiet Wednesday afternoon. “The first one was probably one percent alcohol, but if you’ve never had it before, that could be something special.”

Paleolithic humans probably stumbled upon mead often during the four million years of that era, says Patrick McGovern, a renowned expert on ancient beverages. But there are no containers from that period to test, so there’s

and wine. It’s getting people to try mead.”

So she explains what mead isn’t: it’s not sweet, syrupy, and thick. And she explains what mead is: in its purest form, it’s just honey, water, yeast, and time. Yet in those basic elements is a world of variation. Starrlight’s off-dry traditional mead, for instance, is comparable to a white dinner wine, while its semisweet traditional variety retains honey’s flavor but not its viscosity. The traditional sourwood mead is semisweet as well, but its complex character is evocative of butterscotch. The only difference is that it’s made with

sourwood honey, while the other two are made with wildflower.

“Honey from each place is going to taste different because of the plants that are growing there,” Starr says. Starrlight uses North Carolina honey, bought directly from beekeepers, and honey from every part of the state has a unique flavor. Bees only travel a few miles from their hives, after all, so their honey is the taste of the immediate region. Varietal honeys have even more distinctive flavors. There’s sourwood, which comes from the North Carolina mountains, and cotton honey. In Florida, there’s orange blossom honey, which tastes of citrus.

“We have another honey we made a varietal mead from out of the Pacific Northwest called

meadowfoam, and it tastes like toasted marshmallows,” Starr says. “It was the coolest thing ever. It sold out really quickly.”

Diane Currier worked with Starrlight for a summer before opening her own meadery, Honeygirl, in Durham. Meads, she says, “reflect time and place” based on the fruit and honey harvests distilled in each bottle. When one season’s just-picked strawberries are fermented with local wildflower honey, for example, an extra level of terroir is preserved.

“It’s the way I can carry forward that feeling of drinking the field,” Currier says. “That’s the juicy part for me about making mead.”

The people who craft this ancient beverage believe in it and enjoy making it—and its moment could finally be coming.

Starrlight Mead 480 Hillsboro Street, #1000, Pittsboro, starrlightmead.com

Honeygirl Meadery 105 Hood Street, #6, Durham, honeygirlmeadery.com



no direct evidence. As scientific director of the Biomolecular Archaeology Project for Cuisine, Fermented Beverages, and Health at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia and author of *Uncorking the Past* and this year’s *Ancient Brews Rediscovered and Re-created*, however, he does know where the earliest evidence surfaced.

“The first chemically attested mead is part of the extreme beverage from the Neolithic site of Jiahu in China, circa 7000 B.C. at the earliest,” McGovern says.

Despite its age, mead doesn’t have the footprint of beer and wine—not by miles. Starrlight opened six years ago, and, in that time, Starr has seen the number of domestic meaderies grow from 60 to more than 250.

In North Carolina, Starrlight was the second. Today, there are five in the state, with a sixth opening soon. Starrlight is growing as well: Starr and husband Ben plan to expand to a new, larger location in mid-2017. The new Starrlight will be a neighbor of Fair Game Beverage Company at the Plant in Pittsboro. Two buildings are planned, one of which is a mead hall with a wraparound porch, fireplace, and big wooden beams supporting the ceiling.

Starr is excited: Team Mead is doing well.

“There’s a lot of camaraderie in the mead industry, because we know our competition is not other meaderies,” Starr explains. “It’s beer

**MELODY FREEMAN
POURS A SAMPLE
OF STARRLIGHT
MEAD FOR OAU
TEICHER AND
EMILY WATHEN.**

**PHOTO BY
ALEX BOERNER**