

A Taste of Honey

Mead, the world's oldest brew, is charming the modern palate.

By Nick Passmore

★ Not too long ago, if you had any awareness of mead it was probably a vague image of marauding Vikings quaffing flagons of something like strong beer. Today, modern palates are discovering this ancient brew anew.

According to the *Grocer*, a British trade publication, sales of mead in the UK doubled during 2010. The magazine attributes this trend to the drink's prominence in the Harry Potter films, particularly *The Half Blood Prince*, released in 2009. And the same thing is happening in the U.S.

David Phillips of Astor Wines & Spirits in New York has trouble keeping it in stock. "There's a high demand for mead, and a lot of it is made in such small quantities. There'll be a mead we've been stocking for a while, it will sell out, and we're not able to reorder it."

Mead has been around for a long time, with archaeological evidence suggesting that it's the world's oldest fermented beverage. Chemical analysis of pottery shards from the village of Jiahu in Northern China show that honey was being fermented there 9,000 years ago.

It has been the national drink of Ethiopia since long before records were kept. Homer and Virgil mention it, and it makes multiple appearances in ancient European myths. The mead hall was the center of ancient Norse settlements, a place for communal relaxation and revelry when men grew weary from pillaging northern Europe.



Traditional mead is made by adding water to honey and letting it ferment. In theory, the process is simple, but in practice it's exceedingly complex. Unless the mead-maker gets the details right, you wind up with a pretty rough-tasting brew.

Brad Dahlhofer, founder of the B. Nektar Meadery in Michigan, experienced this firsthand. He had started making home-brewed beer when he came across a section in his manual about brewing mead.

"It took me quite a few years before I actually got around to making a batch of mead, and it was horrible," he says. "I was obviously doing something

sance iconography is a powerful driver of mead's popularity. And even Steve Merr is realistic about the limits of its potential as a marketing strategy. "As much as I enjoy the Renaissance crowds, if you want to be successful you have to reach out to a larger audience," he says.

Mike Fairbrother of the Moonlight Meadery in New Hampshire regards the Renaissance business as "garbage." He takes a more contemporary approach. Starting as a home brewer, he realized that "when I pulled out bot-

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ties of beer my buddies hung around. When I pulled out a bottle of mead, every woman in the room was knocking someone over to taste my product. So I figured I was going to market it to women."

He puts out small 375 ml bottles with names like Desire, Frisky, Seduction, and Wicked. Eighty percent of the customers coming through the door of his storefront in Londonderry are female, and they bring more and more friends with every visit.

Mead, in its modern incarnation, is still an evolving art, and many of the melomels around today taste like cherry cola, or those awful fruit "wines" of the 1980s. But there are plenty of good meads out there, and a few super ones. The best are made with exacting attention paid to every persnickety detail and achieve honey-wine perfection. ❖

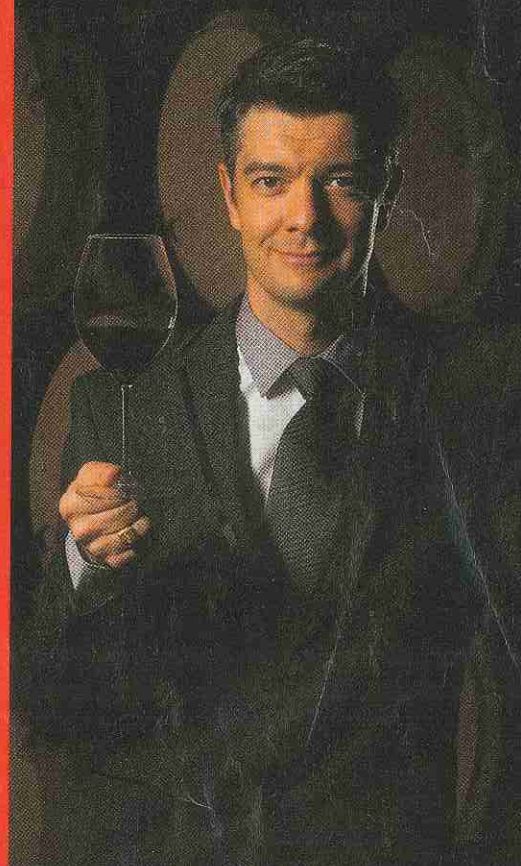
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