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What is Mead?

Mead is honey wine - a fermented alcoholic beverage made of honey, water, and yeast. It is generally pronounced "meed," though South Africans pronounce it "med", to rhyme with "red". A mead that also contains spices (like cloves, cinnamon or nutmeg) or herbs (such as oregano or even lavender or chamomile) is called metheglin. The etymon of this word is the Welsh word meddyglyn, meaning "medicinal liquor", as healing herbs were often stored as metheglin so they would be available over the winter (as well as making them much easier to swallow). Mulled mead is a popular winter holiday drink, where mead is flavoured with spices and warmed, traditionally by having a hot poker plunged into it.

A mead that contains fruit (such as strawberry, blackcurrant or even rose-hips) is called melomel and was also used as a delicious way to "store" summer produce for the winter.

Hippocras is spiced grape wine sweetened with honey. A grape-based wine with added honey is called a piment.

Cyser is made with apple juice and honey; braggot or bracket is made with malted barley and honey. Mead can have a wide range of flavors, depending on the source of the honey, additives called "adjuncts" (including fruit and spices), yeast employed during fermentation, and aging procedure.

Many meads retain some measure of the sweetness of the original honey, and are considered as dessert wines. Drier meads are also available, and some producers offer sparkling meads which make for a delightful celebratory toast.

History of mead...

Mead was a favorite of the Norse gods and heroes in Valhalla, and the magick mead of Suttung - made from the blood of Kvasir - was the source of wisdom and poetry. The epic Beowulf is centered on mead and the lives of the heroes. The nectar and ambrosia of the Greek gods probably referred to fermented honey.

Mead was an entheogen long before the introduction of grape wine. (Entheogen is a compound term that means "containing deity" or "the god within"; a plant or chemical substance taken to enhance a primary religious experience, for example: peyote cactus as used in the Native American Church. The word refers to nonaddictive artificial and natural substances that induce alterations of consciousness similar to those documented for ritual ingestion of traditional shamanic inebriants.) Mead was the drink of the Age of Gold, and the word for drunk in classical Greek is "honey-intoxicated."

Mead was very popular in Northern Europe where grapes could not be grown, but it faded in popularity as low-cost grape wine imports became available. Mead was especially popular with the Slavs and was called in Polish miód (pronounced [mjut]), meaning honey. During the Crusades Polish prince Leszek the White explained to the pope that Polish knights couldn't participate in the crusades because there is no mead in Palestine.

In Finland a sweet mead called Sima (cognate with zymurgy), is still an essential seasonal brew connected with the Finnish Vappu festival. It is usually spiced by adding both the flesh and rind of a lemon. During secondary fermentation raisins are added - they rise to the top of the bottle when the mead is ready to drink.

Ethiopian mead is called "tej" and is usually home-made. It is flavoured with the powdered leaves and bark of "gesho", a hops-like bittering agent which is a species of buckthorn. A sweeter, less-alcoholic version called "berz", aged for a shorter time, is also made. The traditional vessel for drinking tej is a rounded vase-shaped container called a "berele".

Mead is probably also the origin of the word honeymoon, as it was customary to give newlyweds a month's supply of mead to ensure a fruitful beginning to their union.