

Herbal and Fruit Mead

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Mead is likely the oldest fermented beverage on Earth. It is made by cultures all over, with herbs and fruits incorporated early on. Even rainwater in a wild beehive can produce mead!

Some terms for types of meads:

Mead = honey wine

Melomel = fruit mead

Cyser = melomel from apple cider

Pyment = melomel from grapes

Hippocras = pyment with spices

Metheglin = mead fermented or flavored with herbs

Basic gear:

gallon jug with an airlock and
plastic stopper
racking tube
funnel
strainer
sanitizer
food grade bucket
measuring tools
digital food thermometer is handy

Basic ingredients:

wine yeast
honey
clean water
fruits and/or herbs
raisins (yeast nutrient)
black teabags (provide tannin)

Proportion of honey:

I use 1 quart of honey to each gallon of water for a tea mead or fruit that is not sweet. If you are using sweet fruit, cut back the honey to 3 cups per gallon, or to taste.

For herbal tea mead, first I brew a strong infusion by steeping 2-3 cups of dried herbs in a gallon of hot water. Keep the lid on the pot and let the tea steep for 2-4 hours [this is just my experience, you can experiment here with timing, simmered tea rather than steeped, etc]. Add a quart of honey to the warm tea and stir until dissolved. Strain the tea into a sterilized gallon jug and put on a sterile stopper and airlock. When the tea and honey have cooled to room temperature, rehydrate wine yeast and add it to the jug along with a small handful of raisins.

For a fresh herb or fruit mead, first I gather and chop up my ingredients, and add them to a sterile food-grade plastic bucket. I often add a couple teabags to the batch at this time, too. If I want to use commercial yeast and not have too many other microbes, I pour 1+ gallon of hot water over the fruits and herbs. If I want completely fresh raw mead, I use tepid water. Stir in the honey until it's at least mostly dissolved. If you used hot water, let it

cool to room temperature, rehydrate wine yeast and add it in. If you're hoping for wild yeast, make sure it begins to smell yeasty and get bubbly within a couple days. Stir herbs and fruits down into the water 2+ times per day and watch/smell carefully. If the fruits aren't chopped, like elderberries, mash them when you stir. I keep the batch in the bucket as long as it smells freshly yeasty and is very bubbly. When it slows down or starts to smell musty, usually in about a week, I strain it into my sterilized jug, add raisins and put on the airlock.

With either method, you can also add fresh herbs or spices to the jug to gain a bit more flavor, especially from aromatic herbs. Keep the jug in a reasonably warm place but out of the sun, and keep an eye on it that the airlock never goes dry. Rack, or siphon the mead into a fresh sterilized jug at least twice over the next year or so. Eventually the mead will cease to actively ferment and there will be no more pressure in the airlock. Bottle carefully so you don't get any sediment in your wine bottle, let it age in the bottle for at least a month and enjoy. Meads can change quite a bit over time and are often better when older.

Tips:

If you don't include any herbs with tannin in your tea, add a couple tea bags (black or green) per gallon. It's said that tannin gives meads and wines texture.

Make sure that the level of mead is fairly high in the neck of the jug, although it may foam over for the first day or so. It's an anaerobic environment you have created, so you want to minimize the amount of oxygen in the jug. Add water if necessary. If your mead foams over, rinse out your airlock and replace.

Raisins provide nitrogen to help feed the yeast. You can buy yeast nutrient, but I have no experience using it. Feeding the yeast may be helpful if fermentation is slow; I use them in all my batches just to be sure.

References:

Stephen Harrod Buhner - Sacred and Herbal Healing Beers, Siris Books 1998

Sandor Ellix Katz - Wild Fermentation, Chelsea Green 2003

Sandor Ellix Katz - The Art of Fermentation, Chelsea Green 2012

Ken Schramm - The Compleat Meadmaker, Brewers Publications 2003