



Beowulf's beverage

Sky River makes four types of honey wine, a popular drink among heroes of early literature.

A Friend in Mead

Honey wine has been giving us a buzz since before recorded history, and it still tastes good. **BY JESSICA VOELKER**

Humans learned to guzzle booze long before they bothered with writing. That being the case, no one knows for sure which fermented beverage was created first, though it probably wasn't beer. "There are too many *oopses* with making beer," says Denice Ingalls, the owner of Sky River Brewing (skyriverbrewing.com), a mead-making operation in Sultan, Washington.

On a rainy afternoon in April, Ingalls and I sat blinking at one another in the fluorescent-lit lunchroom at Pure Foods, the honey distribution company owned by her ex-father-in-law, Mike Ingalls. It is much more likely, she reasoned, that prehistoric peoples stumbled upon alcohol by accidentally fermenting honey in water and making honey wine, otherwise known as mead.

We do know that once they'd figured out how to make it, our industrious ancestors began dropping whatever flavor agents they could find—hops, fruit, herbs—into their mead. Hops-enhanced mead would eventually morph into beer; grape juice-flavored mead became wine.

When Ingalls started keeping the books for her then-husband's father, she had never tasted mead. But she had read about it. Denice and Mike shared a fascination with very old literature; mead is a favored beverage with the hero in the ancient epic poem *Beowulf*, as well as the saucier pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It wasn't long before chatter in the Pure Foods hive turned to making mead in-house. Ingalls set up shop in a vacant warehouse next to the office, experimenting with different honeys and techniques, and bottled her first batch in 1999.

Traditional meads begin when honey is boiled in order to sterilize it. This produces caramel flavors, said Ingalls, "and then you need sugar to balance the caramel, and alcohol to balance that." These strong, super-sweet meads can be tasty, but they're not the sort of thing you want to sip alongside your salad. To create a mellower, more food-friendly wine in what she calls a "New World style," Ingalls begins with the best honey she can get her hands on and filters out the native yeasts. She adds to it chlorine- and fluoride-free water, and then introduces white-wine yeast. The mead ferments for four to 10 weeks before it is bottled and distributed to shops as nearby as Seattle, as faraway as Tokyo.

Sky River produces sweet, semisweet, and dry meads, and Ingalls recently introduced a raspberry honey wine to the line. In the tasting room, visitors often comment that the dry mead doesn't taste dry. "We're accustomed to dry wines being tannic," Ingalls tells them. "Actually, the two things are very different." The lack of tannins in honey means Sky River's dry and semisweet meads can complement lime-laced Thai and Latin dishes. The sweet mead, meanwhile, is exactly what you want to sip alongside a picnic lunch of salty cheese and tree fruits—just the sort of simple fare Chaucer's pilgrims might have snacked on. ✻

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