

Chapter 27

Midus: A Traditional Lithuanian Mead

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27.1 Introduction

Mead (also called honey wine) is almost certainly the oldest alcoholic beverage known to man. The earliest surviving description of mead is in the Hymns of the [Rigveda](#), one of the sacred books of the [historical Vedic religion](#) dated around 1700–1100 BC ([Rigveda, Book 5](#)). The ancient Greeks honored Bacchus, who was widely regarded as the God of Mead long before he became accepted as the God of Wine. During the medieval times, it spread all over Europe, especially in the Scandinavian, Slavic, and Baltic lands.

A chance occurrence of mead was likely produced during the Stone Age when honey and non-concentrated liquid solution from rain and wild yeast in the air settled into the mixture. Historically, meads were fermented by wild yeasts and bacteria residing on the skins of the fruit or within the honey. Mead is known from many sources of ancient history throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia, although archaeological evidence of it is ambiguous (Hornsey 2003). Its origins are lost in prehistory.

Mead (according to modern understanding) is an [alcoholic beverage](#) that is produced by [fermenting](#) a solution of [honey](#) and water. The alcoholic content of mead may range from about 8 to 18 %. It may be dry, semisweet, or sweet, and it may be still, carbonated, or sparkling; it can be aged for short or very long (12–50 years) time. Honey comes from the nectar of flowers and is named according to the type of blossom from which the nectar is collected by the bees. Mead can have a wide range of flavors, depending on the source of the honey.

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Depending on local traditions and specific recipes, it may be flavored with spices, fruit, or hops; it may also be produced by fermenting a solution of water and honey with grain mash (Fitch 1990). The mead of honey, water, and yeast can be called basic mead. Mead can be also brewed in many forms and methods with different names. The following is a list of some of the numerous forms of mead:

- Melomel is mead made with fruit juices (can contain fruit).
- Pyment is mead made specifically with grape juice.
- Metheglin is mead made with herbs or spices or both.
- Hippocras is mead made with grape juice and with herbs and/or spices.
- Braggot (also called bracket) is a honey ale beverage (originally brewed with honey and hops, later with honey and malt—with or without hops added) made by fermenting honey and grains together.

Once the meadmakers in many countries begin adding fruits, spices, and herbs, it takes on an entirely different character and a new name. It can be made with many different ingredients: caramelized or burned honey, maple syrup, or even with wine vinegar or chili peppers.

Although the process of making mead is easier than brewing beer, the fermentation of mead takes much longer than the fermentation of beer, so mead lovers must be patient to reap the full benefits of their product. The equipment used is very similar to brewing equipment. Homemade mead can be of excellent quality—sometimes better than commercial.

27.2 Lithuanian Mead

Mead was a very important beverage in the life and religion of ancient inhabitants of Northern or Eastern part of Europe. Lithuanian ancestors Balts (Baltic region people, also called Aistians) were making mead thousands of years ago. Good conditions existed to make mead because Lithuanians took honey from wild bees in tree hollows since early times (Piccolomini 1477).

The Anglo-Saxon traveler Wulfstan of Hedeby (about 890 AD) while describing the Aistians referred to the fact that they have plenty of mead (Velius 1996). Mead was widely used by Lithuanian rulers (e.g., Vytautas the Great, the Lithuanian Grand Duke and the famous Lithuanian noble family, Radvila) for state representation. Mead ten or more years old was the landlord's pride, for mead's quality increases with age. The royal manor was keeping royal mead stock.

The biggest amount of mead was used by population in local inns, the network of which, in the fifteenth to eighteenth century, covered the entire territory of Lithuania.

The development of Lithuanian mead lasted till the eighteenth century. Since the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, with the decline of wild beekeeping, mead production decreased and in that time the development of production of beer and vodka

increased. Mead making in Lithuania was remaining only as homemade beverage production.

The exact recipes of the old Lithuanian mead that were made several hundred years ago have been lost. However, it is known (from remaining homemade mead traditions) that, in those times, a water solution of honey was simmered with various spices such as thyme, lemon, cinnamon, cherries, linden blossoms, juniper berries, and hops (Kriščiūnas 1955). The solution then was strained off and fermented with beer or wine yeast. Three types of sweet and mild mead were dominant in Lithuania—basic mead, some art of metheglin (very mild) and some art of melomel (with fruit and berry juice, predominant with wild berry juice) (Kriščiūnas 1926).

The first company that started producing mead in the twentieth century was the Prienai beer brewery. Four kinds of mead were produced there. Mead was left to mature for 5 years. In 1940, this brewery was nationalized and the production of mead was stopped.

In July 1960, the first 1200 bottles of new, very mild, racy, amber-colored, 10 % alcohol by volume Lithuanian mead Dainava were produced in Stakliškės brewery of the Union of Lithuanian Cooperatives and commercialization began. Since then, Lithuanian mead is associated with sweet mead made of natural bee honey and fruit and berry juice, infused with carnation blossom, acorn, poplar buds, hops, juniper berries, and other herbs (Šimkevičius 1969). Since a successful start of the first industrial mead, several other mead varieties were created, and strong beverages were started to be produced using mead as their basis. The name “Lithuanian mead” sometimes associates with a mead nectar or mead balsam, some of the varieties having as much as 75 % of alcohol.

On March 25, 1969, the then invention committee of the Soviet Union registered the production technique of a Lietuviškas midus (Lithuanian mead) as an invention. The author of the invention, Aleksandras Sinkevičius, was awarded an author certificate No. V3114. On September 30, 1969, Elizabeth the Second, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with patent No. 1280830, entitled Stakliškės factory Lietuviškas midus (Lithuanian mead) to solely use the invention of mead production and development of related activities in the territory of the United Kingdom for 16 years. Lithuanian mead has received a well-deserved evaluation at national exhibitions and abroad. Stakliškės mead played its role in preserving the Lithuanian identity in the Soviet era, and today it is an excellent representation of Lithuania abroad. Since the reviving production of mead, several production recipes have been selected and improved, and the same kind of mead is being produced up to date. Lithuanian mead of seven varieties is produced in Stakliškės: Gintaras, Dainava, Bočių, Trakai, Stakliškės, Prienų šilai, and Piemenėlių. Currently, UAB Lietuviškas midus (Lithuanian mead Ltd.) produces three varieties of mead and works according to the quality control system EN ISO 9001-2000. Today new technologies have been implemented in the company, but mead is matured in exactly the same way as several centuries ago, in the cellars of estates of castles. In 2002, Stakliškės mead was given the status of Culinary Heritage.

27.3 Technology of Lithuanian Mead

There are many small homemade mead producers in Lithuania. This mead is produced using very simple equipment (very similar to homebrew beer equipment). Honey can be boiled or not. There is a traditional classification of such homemade mead that depends on the ratio of honey and water (or juice). For example, twofold mead is made from 1 part (liter) of honey and 1 part (liter) of water, threefold—from 1 part of honey and 2 parts of water and so on. One and half mead is the strongest mead in this classification and can be matured 5–10 years, and quadruple mead is relative weak mead and is drinkable after few months.

There is a mead industry in Lithuania too, and it has had a big influence on mead traditions in Lithuania. Lietuviškas midus Ltd. is the only (industrial) mead producer not only in Lithuania but also in the Baltic States. Lietuviškas midus Ltd. produces mead of three kinds: Bočių, Trakai, and Stakliškės. Each kind of mead differs in its taste and aroma, but all of them are a yellowish, aromatic, sweet beverage with a low content of alcohol (12–15 % by volume) made from natural products with a natural fermentation using beer yeasts. This is an exceptional product that can be found nowhere else because this beverage is produced from local bee honey and from herbs grown in the same region.

Stakliškės mead, which contains 12 % alcohol by volume, is a sour vitamin-rich drink made from natural bee honey, flavored with hops, juniper berries, lime tree blossoms, and other extracts, which contain vitamin C. The taste of honey is strong in this mead. This drink is left to mature through natural fermentation for up to 12 months.

Bočių mead contains 14 % alcohol by volume and has the color of amber; its aroma is a wonderful mixture of bee honey, hops, and juniper berries.

Trakai mead has the color of amber and a unique aroma of honey enriched by hops, lime tree blossoms, juniper berries, and acorns.

Mead can be amber to a shade of brown. Its taste and aroma can be characterized as honey, with a sour and sweet flavor, and an aroma of hops. Honey mash for production of industrial mead can be obtained from a mixture of honey and water (a ratio of 1:1 to 1:4) or a mixture of honey, fruit juice, and water (a ratio of 1:1:3) (Notification 2008/443/LT). The Lithuanian mead technology (Fig. 27.1) realizes all three mead-making methods: basic mead, some art of metheglin, and some art of melomel.

Alongside these traditional meads, other mead beverages are made in Stakliškės too: four mead nectars and a mead balsam. Mead nectars are stronger than mead (which contains 25–50 % alcohol by volume) and are mixed with ethyl alcohol and mead distillate and flavored with natural berry (strawberries, blueberries, cranberries, cherries, and black and red currants), apple, or quince juices, flavoured with a bouquet of fragrant herbs. The production technology necessary to produce these mead nectars is extremely complicated, and the process may take up to 24 months. Later, the drink may be matured further. There is one extremely strong mead beverage in Lithuania—mead balsam (75 % alcohol by volume). It is bitter and is drinkable only in special occasions.

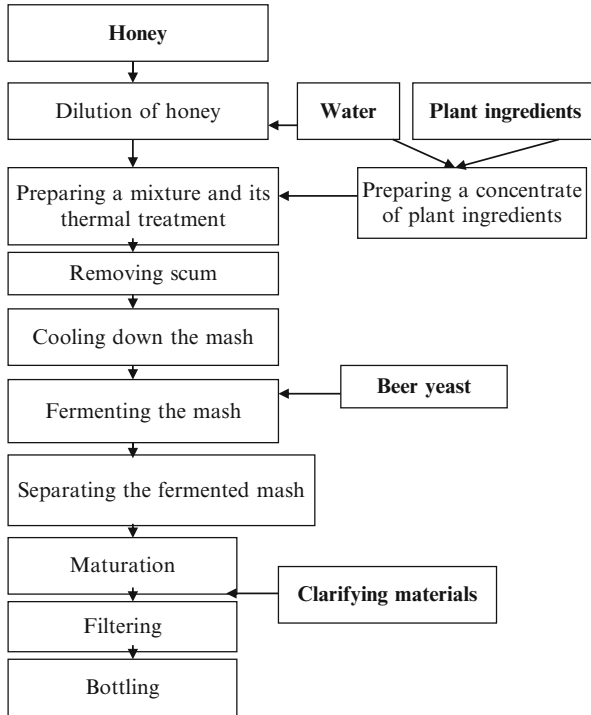


Fig. 27.1 Flow sheet of operations in production of mead

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