

## MEAD. THE DRINK OF OUR ANCESTORS.

By Kimberly Allen Pugh



Mead is the drink of our ancestors. A bold statement but odds are, no matter where your ancestral roots are or what branches are in your family tree, you come from ancient people who held mead in high esteem.

What is mead? By definition, it is an alcoholic drink made from honey, but it is more than the definition suggests. It's the world's oldest alcoholic beverage with a history so intertwined with that of mankind, it's hard to separate legend from fact.

Some historians actually believe mead predates the wheel. That makes sense because long before people settled down to become farmers, ancient hunter gatherers weren't growing their food but they could gather honey from a wild bee hive. Across Europe and Africa different cultures at various times throughout history attributed mythical powers and healing qualities to mead. In the Americas, before Christopher Columbus, the Mayas drank a form of mead believed to have been flavored with agave.

Even though mead is made from honey, it is not always sweet. Alcohol is a byproduct of fermentation produced by the yeast as it eats up the sweetness of the honey just as more traditional wines are made from the sweetness of fruit or sugar. Mead is honey wine but ancient beers and ales also contained fermented honey which makes them a form of mead as well.



Throughout recorded history, mead has been mentioned in prose and poetry. Legendary heroes such as Beowulf and King Arthur drank it. Historical figures such as the Irish monk Saint Finnian, Anglo-Saxon King Harold Godwinson, and Greek historian Plutarch drank mead. Queen Elizabeth of England was even known to have her own royal recipe!

Lately, there has been an increasing interest in the ancient beverage. The CBS Sunday morning news even did a story recently on the growing popularity of mead! Meaderies (places that make mead) are springing up across the country, and last year, the University of California-Davis held its first Mead Makers Short Course. I attended this class and heard one college spokesperson say that the mead industry in the United States is where the California wine industry was in the 1970's. Of course, that's just one person's opinion but, as a mead maker, it is exciting to think about.

Traditional mead, like some wines, gets even better as it ages so it can be saved to toast a special occasion. It is complex, can be dry or sweet and its characteristics are determined by the variety of honey used to make it, the yeast used for fermentation and by the individual who makes it.

Mead made from clover flower honey tastes different from mead made from wildflower honey. There are many varieties of honey just as there are varieties of grapes and just as wine made from different grapes has different characteristics, the same is true for mead made from different types of honey.

To the ancient Greeks, mead was the “Nectar of the Gods”, but you don’t have to be divine to find it in Virginia. Tomahawk Mill Winery ([www.tomahawkmill.com](http://www.tomahawkmill.com)) in Chatham makes one variety of mead along with their more traditional wines. A more diverse selection of meads is available at Hill Top Berry Farm & Winery ([www.hilltopberrywine.com](http://www.hilltopberrywine.com)) in Nellysford with 14 different types of mead, including piment, cyser, metheglins, melomels, rhodomel and traditional. Hill Top, in operation since 1998, is open daily for tasting all year long and they participate in wine festivals across Virginia.

Blacksnake Meadery ([www.blacksnakemead.com](http://www.blacksnakemead.com)) in Dugspur makes several delicious meads, and they are open for tastings on weekends, except during the winter. Those open by appointment include Maid stone Meadery, Storehouse Meadery, Misty Mountain Mead works, and White Oak Mountain Meadery. All meaderies are denoted in the Virginia Wine Guide with a bee symbol and listed at [www.virginiawine.org](http://www.virginiawine.org). For more information on meads in general, visit [www.gotmead.com](http://www.gotmead.com)



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