

Wild-Crafted Mead 101

Equipment & Ingredients

Here is the basic equipment you will need for brewing day. You'll need additional equipment for aging and bottling:

- ☞ A wide-mouthed ceramic, glass or food-grade plastic fermentation vessel (3-5 gallons). Do NOT use metal.
- ☞ A stir-stick. Anything you would use to stir food will do. I recommend a wooden spoon.
- ☞ Cheesecloth or another porous cloth large enough to cover the mouth of your fermentation vessel, and a string or rubber band large enough to cinch it to the vessel mouth. ☞ A one-gallon jug with airlock (or use a balloon) for long-term aging.

The ingredients you will need for a basic mead (for a 1-gallon end-product) are:

- ☞ **Honey.** Whatever is available, but always go for local, raw, unpasteurized honey. There are myriad reasons for this, but to put it simply, it will make for better mead. For a **semi-sweet mead**, use about **one gallon of water** and **3-4 pounds of honey**. Use **less honey (2-2.5 pounds)** if you want a dry mead, or **more honey (4-5 pounds)** for a sweet or dessert mead.
- ☞ **Water.** Local spring water is best. Distilled or purified water will work, as will filtered tap water. Be sure to boil the tap water and cool it or set it out uncovered overnight to evaporate any chlorine.
- ☞ **Flavoring and fermentation-enhancing ingredients.** Adding 10-12 organic raisins, grapes, a bit of tree bark (oak, chestnut, cherry, etc.) or black tea will add not only an interesting flavor profile, but tannin and nutrients. Other options are herbs or spices (a few whole cloves, a cinnamon stick, a couple of peppercorns, a handful of herbs such as sage or rosemary, etc.). I always add at least a small handful of raisins, as they are covered with wild yeast and provide nutrients and tannin.
- ☞ **Acid.** This isn't absolutely necessary, but will help to accentuate the flavor. It's best added after you've initiated fermentation or prior to bottling. Taste to decide. If the mouthfeel seems like it's missing something, adding 1-2 tsps. per gallon (or, to taste) of the juice of an acidic fruit such as lemon, orange, or grapefruit will help provide flavor complexity. Acid can be broken down into three categories: tartaric, malic, and citric. Mostly I add citric (oranges, lemons, etc.) if at all. This is a more advanced topic you can pursue if interested, but it's not vital for basic mead-making.

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- ☞ **Yeast.** The process I'll describe will be for initiating a wild fermentation, but you can get the fermentation going quicker if you add a commercial yeast. Lalvin ICV D-47 is a good all-around wine-yeast for sweet or semi-sweet meads. Red Star Pasteur Champagne yeast is a good option for a mead more akin to a dry, white wine. Since we're doing farmstead mead-making here (or, as I like to call it, Yeti Brewing), you can also sprinkle a teaspoon of bread yeast or a packet of ale yeast.
- ☞ **Fruit or edible flower petals.** You can add any number of ingredients to accentuate your mead. Some of these require a little extra care, but organic fruit such as plums, peaches, figs, or elderberries added during initial fermentation will provide plenty of wild yeast and a fruity flavor profile. High-acid fruits may require additional honey to avoid an overly dry or tart mead. Adding more fruit after the initial fermentation will result in an even fruitier flavor. Any edible flower petals will add some nice flavor and often lead to a higher alcohol mead. Be sure to use *only* the petals. I like to pick dandelion and wild violet in the spring and Rose of Sharon / hibiscus or rose petals as they bloom through the summer.

Blueprint Recipe (One Gallon)

- 2-3 pounds (app. 1 quart) of raw, unfiltered honey, preferably local.
- 1 gallon (give or take) of good spring water, preferably local.
- 3-5 organic raisins for wild yeast, tannins and nutrients. ☐ A squeeze (or 1-2 tsps juice) of a small lemon or orange.
- I suggest adding nothing else for your first batch, as you can use this foundation to make infinite varieties once you have the technique down, but if you have a few edible flower petals on hand, some recently picked fruit, or some herbs you want to add for flavoring, feel free to add some. Herbs and spices are easy to overdo!

The Process

1. Clean & sanitize your equipment

While cleanliness is important in brewing, try to get yourself into a mindset of brewing in a pre-Pasteur world. Always clean your equipment with hot, soapy (preferably natural, unscented detergent) water and rinse well. Most modern homebrewing recipes will tell you to sanitize excessively with chemicals. While I do still sometimes sanitize (a 1:4 bleach/water mix or commercial sanitizers like Star-San or Iodophor are good options), when making wild-crafted mead, I want to encourage wild yeasts, so I tend to avoid sanitizing. Mostly I prefer to use an environmentally safe no-rinse cleaner like One Step. One Step cleans by oxidation and is non-toxic. It's essentially hydrogen peroxide, which you can also use safely for cleaning. Be clean and safe, and use common sense as you would with any food preparation.

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2. Blend water and honey in wide-mouthed container

This recipe is for a naturally fermented no-heat mead. Since room-temperature water and honey are already at the ideal temperature for fermentation, there is no need to heat the must (unfermented mead or wine). Sometimes I may warm the water to help dissolve the honey, and to ladle into the honey container to get as much of it as possible into the fermentation vessel, but I never boil. Boiling (or even pasteurizing) removes a lot of the nutrients and flavor enhancers in the honey and kills off any wild yeast. You only need just enough water to dissolve the honey at this point. I usually mix 1/2 to 3/4 gallons of water with 2-3 pounds (1 quart) of honey.

I always reserve a bit of the water and honey to give room for any excess foam from the fermentation, and to adjust the taste later in the process if I want to lessen or increase the sweetness. Keep in mind that the sweetness will diminish with ageing, but tasting it throughout the fermentation process can give you an idea as to how the final product will taste. Stir vigorously to aerate the must and ensure the honey and water fully mix.

3. Add flavoring and fermentation-enhancing ingredients

For most meads, you'll want to provide some source of tannin, acid and nutrients. For some, you'll likely want to experiment with different flavor profiles. Options for these are in the list of ingredients.

4. Initiate wild fermentation or add yeast

For a wild ferment, simply stir, but be sure to continue stirring a couple of minutes at a time several times a day (at least 2-3), to draw in any wild yeast from the air. If you prefer to work with a wine, beer, or bread yeast (any of these will work), sprinkle a teaspoon or 5 g packet of your preferred yeast on the top of the must, let it rest a few minutes on the surface, and then stir mightily for at least five minutes to aerate. If you've added yeast, the surface should begin frothing within a day or two. Wild ferments can take 3-4 days. The fermentation won't be quite as active, unless you've added yeast-covered fruit (leave plenty of head space or set up an overflow container, as fruit meads in particular often result in a vigorous fermentation). A less active wild ferment will be more akin to opening a carbonated beverage, i.e., bubbly and fizzy.

Either way, keep your vessel in a warm (60–80° F or 15–27° C) dark room, and cover the opening with a cheese cloth to keep out unwanted guests such as flies and ants. Continue stirring a couple of times a day to keep unwanted bacteria from forming on the top until fizzing is minimal and partied-out yeast (lees)

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have settled on the bottom of your fermentation vessel. If your mead tastes good and you don't have the time, interest or equipment to bottle it, you can stop here and just start drinking. It will only be mildly alcoholic and likely quite sweet, but will be full of nutritious probiotics. Most ancient meads were drunk young due to the lack of airtight vessels for storage. I like to keep mine in vessel with a spigot so I can take samples to gauge how the flavor changes. Since continued contact with outside air can produce sour flavors, it's now time to rack, which is fancy homebrew talk for "transfer to a new vessel."

5. Rack / transfer

For long-term fermentation, you will need some additional equipment, but there's no need to break the bank at the homebrew store. If you want to age your mead for a more refined flavor and higher alcohol levels, rack to a carboy (narrow-necked jug) with an airlock using a siphoning tube to create an anaerobic (no air) environment. You can purchase airlocks and bungs (a cork with a hole in it) or make your own using a balloon, condom, or some plastic wrap and a rubber band. What's important is that you allow gases to escape while not letting in outside air that will turn your mead to vinegar.

6. Bottle

Leave the mead in its carboy / jug for six months to a year. I cannot emphasize enough that mead should be given plenty of time to ferment before bottling. In my early attempts, I was too eager, which resulted in being woken up at four in the morning to corks popping in my kitchen, or walking into my cellar to find it smelling suspiciously delicious.

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Check the must for carbonation bubbles, and watch the airlock closely to determine if it is bubbling more than once a minute. If carbonation is still present, wait a bit longer. Alternatively, you can add a bit of sugar or honey dissolved in a small amount of warm water, stir it in, add a raisin or two, and bottle in champagne or Grolsch/swing-top bottles for a carbonated mead. Otherwise, use wine bottles with a wine corker or non-screw-top beer bottles with a bottle capper. Screw-top wine bottles will also work. Place corked bottles on their sides when storing; as with wine, this will result in a more balanced aging and will keep the cork moist. You should wait at least six months before enjoying your creation, but I like to sample a bottle or two early to see how it is progressing, and to determine whether or not I have bottled too soon (i.e., too much carbonation).

7. Drink!

This is just a starting point—you can try as many variations as you dare. I've added peppers, coffee, flowers, vegetables, all kinds of herbs and spices, and more to my meads. If it's edible, give it a try!

Information & Inspiration

- www.chelseagreen.com/make-mead-like-a-viking
- www.jereme-zimmerman.com
- www.facebook.com/JeremeZimmYeti
- Twitter: EarthineerYeti
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Jereme Zimmerman grew up on his parents' northern Kentucky goat farm, Twin Meadows, where he was also homeschooled. After graduating from Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, he moved to the Pacific Northwest, where he immersed himself in the world of homebrewing. As the world's only peace-loving, green-living Appalachian Yeti Viking, Zimmerman writes and speaks regularly on fermentation, mead-making, homesteading, and good eating. He is a regular contributor to New Pioneer, Backwoods Home, Hobby Farm, and Urban Farm, along with other homesteading and sustainability mags. He lives in Berea with his wife, Jenna, daughters Sadie and Maisie, and goofy Pit-Lab hybrid Miss Piggy.

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Go Make Some Mead!