

Thoughts on Mead Judging

by Kristen England

Just as wine does not taste like sweet grapes, mead should not simply be a cloyingly sweet honey cocktail. While honey character should be evident, the mead should also be balanced and drinkable. Inasmuch, judges should consider all of the following aspects when evaluating a mead:

On bias: Most people prefer sweet meads to dry, carbonated to still, and sack strength to hydromel. You must understand your own preference in order to keep it from biasing your judgment. Point short, do not let your mead *liking/wanting* to influence your mead *judging*.

On quantitative levels: Although the entrant must specify the carbonation level, sweetness and strength, judges often place too much emphasis on these indicators during evaluation and scoring. It would serve a judge well to be aware that a person's perceptions of sweetness and carbonation levels are extremely subjective. Give the entrant the benefit of the doubt and take everything with a grain of salt. If the entry is completely off the mark, the following point deductions should be made off the top of the total score:

- -3 points = Two levels off (e.g., sweet but entered as dry, sparkling but entered as still)
- -1 point = One level off (e.g., sweet but entered as semi, petillant but entered as dry)

On drinkability: First and foremost, ensure that the mead is readily drinkable. Lighter, drier meads will be more delicate and quaffable. Sweet meads, which are more like dessert wines, will be much "heavier" and not as refreshing. In either instance, both should be finished products (properly fermented or attenuated, properly aged or conditioned, and readily drinkable).

On honey varietals: Each varietal should reflect its monofloral description. It's very important to note that there is always some variation due to source region, year/season collected, and climactic conditions during the growing season. Just ensure that the mead is following the "theme" of the variety. Sweeter meads will always have more varietal character simply because more honey was used in their making. If possible, a description of the honey variety should be provided. If one isn't, do your best by looking for common floral markers, and seeing if a noticeable varietal character is present (even if you don't recognize it).

On adjuncts: Be sure you understand what adjuncts are present, and what character they provide to mead. When in doubt, ask other judges and keep asking until you find the answer. There are so many things that can be added to a mead that it does the entrant an injustice if you don't ask a simple question.

- Pyment specific: Grape varieties are not always to be thought of as wine varieties. For example, chardonnay grapes are not inherently buttery even though a lot of chardonnay wine is buttery.
- Levels: The adjunct should never completely overpower the mead. The levels can be very high but one should be able to detect either the honey (varietal) or the fermented honey character.

On balance: There are three components that need to be addressed when thinking about balance in a mead: sweetness, acidity and tannin. These vary by the type of mead. Sweeter meads will need a greater amount of acid to balance them than drier meads. Traditional meads will have nearly no tannin as honey doesn't naturally possess it. Grapes, berries and 'stone' fruits usually contain quite a bit of tannin from their skins. Same theme goes for acidic fruits. Importantly, there should be a crispness to the finish of every mead no matter the sweetness to keep it from being flabby. Finally, no mead should have a "raw" or unfermented honey flavor.