

Preamble to “A Treatise on Mead Judging”

by Michael L. Hall

Mead judging is truly in a nascent state. Mead has been brewed and consumed for thousands of years, and we assume that during that time there have been numerous discussions of its merits and attributes. However, primarily because mead has not been as popular as beer and wine during the last several centuries, relatively little information on mead content, flavors, recipes and styles has survived to the present day. Compare, for example, the information known about piment with that of Vienna beer or porter. Consequently, the state of the art of mead judging has lagged behind that of beer and wine.

It therefore seems appropriate, after several years of mead judging under our belts (so to speak), to step back and reflect on the process, with the hopes of improving and defining it before bad practices become ingrained in the mead judge’s psyche. The following article is my essay at this goal.

I’ve been judging mead in state and national competitions since 1990. During that time I gained a lot of experience, but I also noticed several problems associated with mead judging. The first problem is one that I may have inadvertently contributed to myself. In the 1992 Mazer Mead Cup the winning traditional mead contained small quantities of tea, as revealed by the published recipe. I (and probably others) expressed concern over a winning entry which contained ingredients that were inappropriate to the style. The organizers of the Mazer Mead Cup changed the categories in subsequent years to include both a traditional mead, which allowed other ingredients, and a show mead, which only allowed honey, yeast and water. I think that a better solution would be to define the category in terms of tastes, rather than ingredients. A traditional mead would then contain any ingredients the brewer cared to use, but any spicy or fruity character would be considered a flaw.

A second problem is that the judging categories seem to be based more on which types of mead have specialized names, rather than on entry frequency or natural divisions. For example, I’ve judged many more raspberry melomels than grape melomels, but only grape melomels are split out from the melomel category because they have the specialized name “piment”. I have devised some category descriptions that will even out the entries per category while still retaining the specialized names and the natural divisions. The basic idea is to have numerous subcategories that can be combined for judging purposes or kept separate if the number of entries is high enough. This concept will enable the category guidelines to be functional for both large and small competitions.

A third problem is that meads that use an interesting varietal honey tend to get short-changed if the judge is not familiar with the type of honey. A mead made with strongly

flavored and dark mesquite honey is a prime example of this problem. I propose that traditional meads that feature a varietal honey be judged separately, and that information on the type of honey for all meads be submitted by the entrant and given to the judge the same way the fruit and spice ingredients are commonly done now. The varietal information would be treated as one of several modifiers on the category style.

A fourth and final problem that I have noticed in mead judging is similar to the “bigger is better” problem in beer judging. I have judged many meads which were light, delicate and wonderful that were dismissed by other judges because they weren’t extreme enough. Strangely enough, this is a case where there already exists a historical name for the type of mead that is not currently being used. A hydromel was traditionally a mead that had been weakened by dilution. I think that the best way to give hydromels the consideration they deserve would be to add “hydromel” as a modifier on the category style.

I should also mention my predispositions about mead (which some of you may not share). Mead is not beer; it should not contain hops, with the exceptions of braggot and hop-flavored metheglins. Mead is not wine; it should not have grape or wine character, with the exception of pyment and hippocras. Mead is a fermented honey beverage; it is imperative that honey be expressed in the taste and the aroma.

After considerable reflection, I came up with “A Treatise on Mead Judging” which incorporates solutions to the aforementioned problems, fleshes out the descriptions of the mead categories and describes the details of a mead judging. With the hope that future mead contests will adopt them, I offer the following guidelines.

A Treatise on Mead Judging

by Michael L. Hall

Introduction

This article provides a description of some of the details of a mead competition. It is not a complete description; many of the procedures that are common to a beer competition are omitted. The first section is concerned with the individual categories into which the meads are to be entered. The duties of the competition organizer are detailed in the second section, and instructions for the judges themselves are given in the final section. The last section is designed to be printed out and handed to judges at the beginning of a competition. The judges should also be provided with the modifier descriptions, the category description and the subcategory descriptions for all of the subcategories that they will be judging during the current flight.

Category Descriptions

Meads should be entered into and judged according to the following categories. In addition to specifying a category, the entrant should also specify which of the category modifiers (Variety of honey, Strength, Sweetness, and Carbonation Level) applies to the entry. All of this information will be provided to the judges. Subcategories may be combined at the discretion of the competition organizer, after the entry deadline has passed.

Modifiers:

The category modifiers are to be provided in addition to the category and subcategory information. Judges should use this information to order meads within a flight and for insight into what the brewer intended. However, judges should not detract heavily from a mead's score because it does not fall distinctly within the range of the modifier specified by the brewer.

Varietal modifier: The variety of honey that a mead is made from will often have a large effect on the flavor of the mead. The brewer should specify the varietal honey (for example, clover or orange blossom). The mead should have some character from the varietal honey, especially if it is a traditional mead.

Strength (Hydromel / Standard / Sack) modifier: The strength of a mead is primarily based on the original gravity. Hydromels (watered mead) will have specific gravities roughly less than 1.080. Standard strength meads will be in the original gravity range from 1.080 to 1.120. Sack meads will generally be greater than 1.120. This modifier was designed so that well-made delicate hydromels will not be overlooked in favor of the more emphatic sack meads. Make sure to judge each strength of mead according to its own merits.

Sweetness (Dry / Medium / Sweet) modifier: The perceived sweetness is largely a function of the final specific gravity, but other variables such as the acidity will also have an effect. Roughly, a dry mead will have a final gravity less than 1.010, a medium mead will fall in the range from 1.010 to 1.025, and a sweet mead will be greater than 1.025.

Carbonation Level (Still / Sparkling) modifier: Still meads should have little or no carbonation. Some slight carbonation is acceptable. Sparkling meads should have a definite effervescence and tingly mouthfeel. Tiny bubbles are preferable to large bubbles.

Categories and subcategories:

1. Traditional Mead – A mead made primarily from honey, water and yeast. Honey should be expressed in aroma and flavor. Additives of any type are allowed at sub-threshold levels (spice or fruit character is considered a flaw). The mead should have a neutral acidity-sweetness-tannin balance.
 - a. Standard Traditional Mead – uses clover or wildflower honey.
 - b. Varietal Honey Traditional Mead – is made from honey from a particular flower source (clover and wildflower honey are not acceptable in this category). The brewer must name the varietal honey. Examples include buckwheat, orange blossom, star thistle, fireweed, snowberry, raspberry blossom, mesquite, heather, alfalfa, tupelo, etc. The mead should showcase the distinctive taste of the particular varietal honey.
2. Melomel – A mead made with fruit. The fruit should be expressed in the aroma, the taste and the color of the mead (see subcategories for exceptions). Honey should be expressed in aroma and flavor. There should be a good balance between the honey and the fruit character in both the aroma and taste.
 - a. Cyser (Apple Melomel) – should have distinct apple character in aroma and taste. Color should be straw to golden.
 - b. Pyment (Grape Melomel, also spelled Pymeat) – may be either straw to golden color or have a pink to purple cast. The mead should have a definite grape wine character, but should also have a balanced honey character. Grassy white wine

character or buttery (diacetal) chardonnay character is appropriate in pynmead (hippocras) only.

- c. Raspberry Melomel – should have a distinct and intense raspberry flavor. Raspberry tartness and tannin should be balanced by honey sweetness. Honey flavor and aroma should still come through. The mead should have a deep red-purple color.
- d. Cherry Melomel – should have a deep reddish brown color. Cherry flavor (either cherry pie or sour cherry) and aroma should come through strongly, but be balanced by the honey character. Many people have a knee-jerk distaste for real cherry flavor due to cherry-flavored medicines taken as a child; judges should either overcome their prejudice or refrain from judging cherry melomels. Some almond character from the cherry pits is okay and can be a plus. This melomel may range from a light cherry hydromel to a heavy, sherry-like after dinner drink. Some oxidation may be appropriate to give this mead a sherry or port character.
- e. Plum Melomel – has many similarities to cherry melomel. The mead should have a deep purple to reddish brown color. Plum character should be apparent in both the aroma and taste, balanced with the honey character. Some oxidation may be appropriate to give this mead a sherry or port character.
- f. Peach Melomel – should have fresh peach taste, like biting into a peach. Instead of having a fruit-honey balance, peach melomels are unique in that the peach taste blends with the honey taste, giving a whole greater than the sum of the parts. Slight cloying quality okay. Color should be a pinkish golden.
- g. Apricot Melomel – should have a pink-orange tint. Apricot taste and aroma should be strong, with an accompanying strong honey character. The acid-sweetness balance in this mead is particularly hard to attain, as apricots tend to be very acidic.
- h. Strawberry Melomel – should have fresh strawberry aroma. May not have any discernible strawberry color. Strawberry taste may be delicate. Good examples will have a definite strawberry character in the aroma and taste, but will probably be delicate meads in order to be balanced.
- i. Blueberry Melomel – may not have any discernible blueberry color. Blueberry taste may be delicate. Good examples will have a definite blueberry character in the aroma and taste, but will probably be delicate meads in order to be balanced.
- j. Berry Melomel – may be Boysenberry Melomel, Marion Berry Melomel, Morat (Mulberry Melomel), Blackberry Melomel, Cranberry Melomel, Elderberry Melomel or others. Most berry melomels will have a distinct reddish to purple color. Berry flavor and aroma should be present and balance with honey character. Berry melomels have a tendency to be overly tannic; a good tannin-sweetness balance is desired.

- k. Citrus Melomel – may be more acidic (tarter) than other melomels, but should still have a good acid/sweet balance. The melomel may be made with orange, lemon, lime, grapefruit, tangerine or other citrus fruits. Little or no expression of fruit in the color. Citrus character may be hard to discern unless compared against a traditional mead. Honey character will probably dominate, but citrus should still come through.
 - l. Tropical Fruit Melomel – may include papaya, mango, kiwi, guava, pomegranate or other tropical fruits. Should express fruit character, but may be difficult to judge due to less familiarity with the fruit tastes. Color may be straw (kiwi) to orange golden (mango, papaya, guava) to purplish (pomegranate). Fruit may be expressed as an enhanced fruitiness blended with the honey flavor.
 - m. Prickly Pear Mead – should have a deep golden color. Prickly pear will be expressed as a dry, dusty or powdery taste, overlaid on a sweet background. Honey should be prominent and accentuated by the prickly pear.
 - n. Other – see general melomel description.
3. Metheglin – A mead made with spices or herbs. The spices should be expressed in the aroma and flavor of the mead, but usually won't appear in the color. Honey character should be apparent in the aroma and flavor. There should be a good honey-spice balance in the mead. Metheglins containing more than one spice should also have a good balance between the different spices. Often, a blend of spices may give a character greater than the sum of its parts.
- a. Mulling Spice Metheglin – may contain Allspice, Cinnamon, Cloves, Ginger, Nutmeg, Citrus Rind, Mace or other mulling spices. Most metheglins in this subcategory will contain a blend of these spices. If several spices are used, spices should blend together. A common problem is overdoing the ginger, as it tends to dominate. Honey should be very noticeable and should blend well with these spices.
 - b. Beer Spice Metheglin – may contain Coriander, Cardamom, Curaçao Orange Peel, Woodruff or other spices often associated with beers. Spices should be evident and balanced with honey character. May be reminiscent of a Wit Beer or Berliner Weisse. The mead will probably be light in order not to overwhelm the delicate spices.
 - c. Mellow Spice Metheglin – may contain Vanilla Bean, Chocolate, Anise, Maple Syrup, Sassafras Root or other mellow or rounded tasting spices. These spices all have smooth tastes, in contrast to the more piquant spices in the other subcategories. The flavor of the spices may blend with that of the honey more than be balanced with it. Acidity-sweetness balance may be particularly important, as these metheglins will have a tendency to be cloying. Some cloying character is acceptable. Anise has a flavor similar to licorice.

- d. Italian Spice Metheglin – may contain Oregano, Basil, Thyme, Bay Leaves, Rosemary, Garlic or other Italian spices. Think of this metheglin as an accompaniment for Italian food, enhancing and augmenting the tastes present in the meal. Mixtures of these spices may be more common than individual spice metheglins. The mead may be light to balance the honey and spice character, with the exception of garlic metheglins.
 - e. Flower Petal Metheglin – may be made from Rose Petals (Rhodomel), Dandelion Petals, Lavender Petals, Tea Blends (Earl Grey, Orange Pekoe, Bergamot, Chamomile, Jasmine, etc.), Heather Tips, Hop Cones (Miodomel), Honeysuckle Flowers, Elderberry Flowers or other flower petals. In most cases, these metheglins will be hydromels in order to showcase the fragile taste and aroma of the flower petals. Metheglins made with teas and hops will be the exception to this, and will be stronger in body. Honey character should be present, but will be light to balance the delicate flower character.
 - f. Peppery Metheglin – may contain White Pepper, Black Pepper, Mint, Spearmint, Peppermint, Lemon Grass, Curry Powder, Grains of Paradise, Juniper Berries, Spruce, Mustard Seed, Fennel, Turmeric, Fenugreek, Cumin or other peppery spices. These pungent spices provide a fitting counterpoint to the sweetness of the honey. Honey should be prominent but balanced with the spice character.
 - g. Chile Mead (Capsimel, named for the spicy chemical capsaicin and the genus of chile plants, capsicum) – may contain Jalapeño Peppers, New Mexico Green Chiles (Sandia, Española, Hatch, Numex Big Jim, Rio Grande), Red Chiles, Poblano Chiles, Mexican Pequin Pepper, Ancho Chiles, Chipotle Chiles, Tabasco Peppers, Cayenne Peppers, Anaheim Chiles, Serrano Peppers, Habanero Peppers, Cascabel Peppers, Thai Peppers or other chiles or peppers. The metheglin may vary widely in amount of heat. Always judge capsimels last in a flight. The taste of the chile should be evident as well as the heat. A strong sweetness and honey flavor will probably be necessary to balance the chile flavor. Chile character should also be present in the aroma.
 - h. Other – see general metheglin description.
4. Braggot – A mead made with malted barley or wheat (also spelled Bracket or Bragget). The majority of the fermentable sugars should come from honey (otherwise it is really more of a honey ale). A braggot should have good malt character in the aroma and flavor. Hop bitterness, flavor and aroma may be present, but are not required. There should be a good balance between the beer aspect and the mead aspect of a braggot, especially with regard to maltiness and bitterness vs. honey character.
- a. Pale Braggot – has a color in the light straw to golden range. Malt taste will be light and honey character will be light to balance.

- b. Amber Braggot – has a color in the golden to light brown range. The braggot will often contain crystal or caramel malt, which will have a residual sweetness that will blend with the honey aspects.
 - c. Dark Braggot – derives its color from darker malts, such as chocolate malt, black patent malt and roasted barley. The tastes of the darker malts (roasted character or chocolate malt smoothness) should be present.
5. Mixed Category Mead – A mead that combines ingredients from two of the three previous categories. The mead should exhibit the character of all of the ingredients, and should show a good blending or balance between the various flavor elements.
- a. Hippocras (Spiced Pymment) – a mead made with grapes and spices. Grassy white wine character or buttery chardonnay character is appropriate in hippocras (or pymment) only.
 - b. Apple Pie Mead (Cyser with Mulling Spices) – a mead made with apples and Allspice, Cinnamon, Cloves, Ginger, Nutmeg, Citrus Rind, Mace or other mulling spices.
 - c. Spiced Melomel or Fruited Metheglin – a mead made with fruit and spices.
 - d. Maltomel – a mead made with malt and fruit.
 - e. Maltegin – a mead made with malt and spices.
 - f. Other – see general mixed category description.

Instructions for Organizers

Organizing a mead judging is very similar to organizing a beer judging. There are concerns with advertising, handling the entries, registration, getting enough judges to participate, buying prizes, and making sure that the meads get a fair judging. Since the overlap is so great, and since there have been other publications concerned with organizing a beer judging, only the topics peculiar to judging mead will be covered in this section.

Entry form – The entry form for a mead judging should contain, in addition to the standard information (mead name, brewer name and address, recipe), information specific to meads. This includes the category and subcategory of the mead, and all of the modifiers: variety of honey, additives (fruit, spices, malt), strength (hydromel/standard/sack), sweetness (dry/medium/sweet), and carbonation level (sparkling/still). All of this information except the recipe, the mead name and the brewer's name and address should be passed on to the judge. For instance, a judge might find himself judging a still, sweet prickly pear sack mead made with mesquite honey or a sparkling, dry blackberry hydromel made with orange blossom honey, with full knowledge of that information.

Stewarding concerns – A mead steward should always have a corkscrew available in addition to a bottle opener. The serving temperature for a mead should be cellar temperature, 55–60 F. Some judges will prefer their meads warmer than this, and can be accommodated by setting the bottles out thirty minutes before the judging begins (or at the same time the judging begins, if necessary). Be sure to protect braggots from light while setting them out to warm, as some brewers may include hops that can become skunky from exposure. Always decant the mead as if there were sediment present, even though that is often missing from meads.

Smaller flights – Consider the higher alcohol content of meads and try to make the individual flights smaller, on the order of 10 meads. The brewers will get better feedback if they are not unfortunate enough to have the 14th mead tasted in a flight. It's better to have two flights (a morning and an afternoon) than one marathon session.

Categories – Start out with the full category and subcategory listings (see Categories section) for the contest. After the entry deadline has passed, combine subcategories and give awards according to the number of entries received in a subcategory per the following scheme.

- 0-2 entries – combine with a similar subcategory or the main category.
- 3-5 entries – judge separately and give at most a single award.
- 6-8 entries – judge separately and give at most two awards.
- >8 entries – judge separately and give at most three awards.

Try to combine subcategories that are similar to one another. A typical small mead competition (possibly part of a larger beer competition) might combine all of the subcategories so that only the five main categories remain. A medium size mead competition might have the following thirteen grouped subcategories:

1. Traditional Mead

- a. Standard Traditional Mead
- b. Varietal Honey Traditional Mead

2. Melomel

- a. Cyser & b. Pymment
- c. Raspberry Melomel, d. Cherry Melomel & e. Plum Melomel
- f. Peach Melomel & g. Apricot Melomel
- h. Strawberry Melomel, i. Blueberry Melomel & j. Berry Melomel
- k. Citrus Melomel, l. Tropical Fruit Melomel, m. Prickly Pear Mead & n. Other

3. Metheglin

- a. Mulling Spice Metheglin
- b. Beer Spice Metheglin & c. Mellow Spice Metheglin
- d. Italian Spice Metheglin & e. Flower Petal Metheglin
- f. Peppery Metheglin, g. Chile Mead & h. Other

4. Braggot

- a. Pale Braggot, b. Amber Braggot & c. Dark Braggot

5. Mixed Category Mead

- a. Hippocras, b. Apple Pie Mead, c. Spiced Melomel or Fruited Metheglin, d. Maltomel, e. Malteglin & f. Other

A large mead competition, such as the Ambrosia Adventure or the Mazer Mead Cup, might retain all of the subcategories or even add a few for new groupings according to the entries received. Following this plan the category and subcategory divisions can be used for any size of mead competition.

In addition to awards in the grouped subcategories, best-of-category awards and a best-of-show award for the meads should be given. Make sure to have a printout of the category description and the subcategory descriptions that are to be judged on each judging table for easy reference.

Instructions for Judges

As a mead judge, you have been called upon to give your impression and objective critical opinion of the meads in the flight placed before you. Just how is this accomplished? If you have judged beer in the past you already have a great deal of the knowledge necessary to judge mead, because the procedures to judge beer and mead have much in common. However, mead judging does have its idiosyncrasies and needs to be considered separately.

Before the meads are brought out, look over the information provided by the competition organizer. This should include a description of all of the mead categories and subcategories to be judged. Make yourself familiar with the attributes that are listed, and discuss the characteristics you will be looking for with the other judges at the table.

There should also be a list of the meads to be judged on the table, along with the category modifiers (Variety of honey, Strength, Sweetness, and Carbonation Level) for each mead. Go over this list and decide on the order in which you would like to receive the meads. In general, start with the meads that are dry, sparkling hydromels made with mellow spices, delicate fruits and clover honeys, and finish up with sweet, still sack meads made with hot spices, heady fruits and strongly flavored honeys. This is done so that your palate won't be overwhelmed by the strong tastes early in the flight and not be able to discern the merits of the lighter meads. Inform the steward the order you've decided upon, and the preferred serving temperature for the meads.

Also, take note of the number of meads to be judged in the flight. If there are fifteen meads in the flight, keep that in mind as you take small sips of each mead to avoid intoxication. If there are only eight meads in the flight, you may be more cavalier about your tasting quantities.

If possible, do a bottle inspection before serving each mead, looking for fill level, bacterial rings (a rarity in meads) and sediment level. Green or clear bottles are fine, as skunkiness shouldn't be a problem in meads, unless the brewer has added hops (as in a braggot). Don't prejudge the mead, but do use all the information you have available to help diagnose problems. When pouring the mead, decant slowly off of any sediment that may be present, and pour all glasses before righting the bottle.

While judging the mead, keep in mind your overall concerns. The primary concern is balance, both the acidity-sweetness-tannin balance and the balance between the honey tastes and the other tastes, such as fruit or spice, that are present in the mead. Another very important concern is the expression of the honey character in the mead. The honey should come through strongly in the aroma as well as the flavor; there should be no doubt that honey was included in the ingredient list. If the honey is a varietal honey, that should be reflected in the character. Lastly, you should be concerned about the expression of the extra ingredients

(besides honey) that are included in the mead. Spices should be present in the aroma and flavor, and most fruits and malts will also have a distinguishing color. Always remember that this is not a hedonic judging, where meads are scored according to how well they subjectively please the imbiber, and leave your personal flavor preferences at home.

After pouring a sample, quickly inhale the aromas and write down your impressions. Next check the sample for color, clarity and carbonation. A still mead with slight carbonation should not merit a big detraction, but in general the carbonation level should match that indicated by the brewer. Be sure to make notes of everything you detect about the appearance. Next, smell the mead again and take a slow sip. Think about the flavors you are experiencing, where in your mouth they seem to be most prominent, and how the mead feels on your tongue. Think about the attack and the lingering aftertaste of the mead. Transcribe all of your thoughts for the benefit of the brewer.

Mead flavor flaws are similar to beer flaws, but the emphasis is different. Meads, especially heavier meads, may have a harshness or bite in the palate and the aroma that comes from the presence of higher alcohols. Younger meads may have a nutrient taste from the use of ammonium phosphate; this takes time to mellow. Meads that have been aged for a long time can become oxidized and have the characteristic wet cardboard taste. Sometimes, the sherry character associated with oxidation can be appropriate in a mead, as in a cherry or plum melomel. Meads can also be prone to phenolic and metallic tastes, which are not appropriate. In contrast to beer, meads will not exhibit DMS or skunky tastes, with the exception being braggots.

Make sure to cleanse your palate between entries with water, bland bread or a cracker. Do your preliminary judging and scoring in silence so that you do not influence the other judges. The entrant will benefit more from several independent judgments than from several versions of the same outspoken judge's opinions. Whether you prefer to assign scores in a top-down or bottom-up fashion, put the most emphasis on giving complete and thorough written comments, because they will matter more to most brewers than the overall score. When the initial scoring is finished, discuss the mead with the other judges, with an emphasis on learning all you can from them.

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This article may be found on the World Wide Web in various forms on the Los Alamos Atom Mashers "Goodies Page", <http://hbd.org/atom mash/goodies.html>.

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