

With an abundance of honey

Zydeco Meadery brings mead making tradition to Massachusetts



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Non-drinkers like me may tend to think of mead — honey wine — as a beverage no one has consumed since Medieval times. Eric Depradine of Zydeco Meadery in North Attleboro begs to differ.

Depradine and his wife DeAundra have been making mead for more than a decade, first in Louisiana, later in Missouri, and now in Massachusetts. He told me in a recent telephone interview that mead is still produced in China, in India, in West Africa, and in Europe ... basically wherever bees are raised.

"To be honest with you," he said, "all cultures practice beekeeping. And many beekeepers inadvertently make their own mead by harvesting their honey too soon."

The Depradines didn't start out with the intention of making mead. After meeting in college in Louisiana and getting married, they spent their honeymoon in Washington state. There they enjoyed sipping riesling.

They returned to Louisiana intending to try making that wine themselves, only to discover that the grapes for it couldn't be raised in the Deep South. Instead, Depradine said, "My wife purchased a book for me on mead making because Louisiana has an abundance of honey."

The pair moved to Missouri, where in his spare time Depradine took a winemaking class at Highland Community College. The college opened a winemaking incubator, where clients could learn more and share expensive equipment.

Eventually, the Depradines were ready to begin selling their mead. They decided to pay tribute to the idea's origins by calling their enterprise Zydeco Meadery. Zydeco is the distinctive African-American style of music that came out of Opelousas, Louisiana, where the couple once lived.

Eric Depradine is happy to be back in Massachusetts; he grew up here before heading to Louisiana for college. He sells four types of mead today. One of these, called Yankee Heritage Cyser, was inspired by a visit to Cider Days here in western Massachusetts in 2020.

"My mother, Gail Depradine, and I made the trip from Boston to the Shelburne Falls area and tasted a colonial-style hard cider at the former Bear Swamp Orchard and Cider," Depradine recalled.

"It was barrel-aged with apples, brown sugar, and raisins — rich, rustic, and deeply rooted in New England tradition. I took a bottle back to Kansas City for my wife to try, and she immediately asked, 'Can you make a mead version of this?'"

After some thinking, he explained, "I reimagined the recipe, swapping brown sugar for knotweed honey from Crystal Honey in Billerica, and initially using apples from New York's Finger Lakes region. Later, I turned to fruit from Pine Hill Orchards in Colrain, coming full circle back to the orchards of western Massachusetts."

I asked how the Cyser differs from the hard cider to which we are accustomed. Depradine suggested that the alcohol content is slightly higher and that the mead might be a little sweeter, thanks to the knotweed honey



Eric Depradine and his wife DeAundra have been making mead for more than a decade, first in Louisiana, later in Missouri, and now in Massachusetts. Courtesy Jason Dailey



A hydrometer showing the apple raisin mead is finished fermenting. Courtesy Zydeco Meadery



A five-gallon bucket of crystallized Massachusetts knotweed honey. Courtesy Zydeco Meadery



A top view of fermenting knotweed mead in a stainless steel tank. Courtesy Zydeco Meadery

he adds to his apple juice.

He added that the blend of apples he uses for juice, a mixture of aromatic and bittersweet apples, contributes to the mead's unique flavor.

Depradine hopes to return to Cider Days another year, perhaps to sell his mead. Meanwhile, he and his family (the Depradines have two children) are busy making mead and selling it at various farmers markets. Locally, it is available at Ryan & Casey Liquors in Greenfield.

Despite his passion for making mead, Eric Depradine is determined to keep his business from getting too large, in part to ensure consistent quality, and in part because his weekday work is his family's primary source of income. "It gives me more stability than is available to other winemakers," he said of the job.

In the distant future, he and his family hope to expand to make more mead and per-

haps even to open a restaurant. For the moment, he is proud of the product he makes and the public's reaction to it.

I asked Eric Depradine for a recipe, and he gave me instructions for making mead at home.

He noted that the specialized equipment — the carboys, etc. — can all be purchased at a homebrew supply store or an online homebrewing site.

Homemade Mead a la Zydeco

Ingredients:
3/4 pound local honey plus more honey to taste much later

1 1/4 gallons unpasteurized local apple juice
1 handful raisins
1 packet wine yeast
2 potassium metabisulfite tablets, separated
a small amount of potassium sorbate

Instructions:

Sanitize your equipment. Place the 3/4 pound honey and the apple juice in a 3-gallon bucket.

Place the raisins in cheesecloth, and tie the cheesecloth to create a secure bundle to keep the raisins in place.

Add the wine yeast and the cheesecloth-covered raisins to the bucket of honey and apple juice.

Cover the bucket, and let it sit and ferment for 2 weeks.

Sanitize a glass carboy. Remove the raisin packet from the liquid, and transfer the mead to age and clarify in the carboy. Add a potassium metabisulfite tablet to prevent oxidation.

Allow the mead to sit for 30 days. Look at it and sniff it. It should be relatively clear with no smell like vinegar or nail polish. If it is okay, let it sit for another 30 days. Look and smell again.

If you do get the smell, you

will have to start over again, making sure to sanitize all equipment and to top off the carboy to minimize oxygen exposure.

If your mead looks and smells okay at the end of the 60 days, sweeten the mead with a little more local honey to taste; then add a little potassium sorbate to prevent re-fermentation.

Add another sulfite tablet

to prevent oxidation.

Either transfer the mead to a clean carboy or bottle and cork it in smaller quantities. Share with friends and family. You will end up with a little over 1 gallon of mead.

Tinky Weisblat is an award-winning cookbook author and singer known as the *Diva of Deliciousness*. Visit her website, TinkyCooks.com.