What is Mead Judging?

- Not just picking the winning (best) mead
- Not just assigning a numerical score
- Entails a sensory description of the mead
  - Covers all aspects
  - Presence and absence of characteristics
  - Includes feedback on how well the mead fits the intended style
  - May provide troubleshooting advice
- Complete evaluation takes 10 – 12 minutes

What is Mead Judging – cont’d?

- More complex than judging beer
  - Individual styles allow wide variations
  - Many potentially subjective aspects
- Requires familiarity with many types of ingredients
  - Fruits
  - Grapes
  - Spices
  - Honey varieties
- Much in common with wine judging
- Less in common with beer judging

Scoresheet Layout and Points

- Bouquet/Aroma – 10 points
  - Honey expression, alcohol, esters, complexity, other aromatics
- Appearance – 6 points
  - Color, clarity, brilliance, legs, carbonation
- Flavor – 24 points
  - Honey, sweetness, acidity, tannin, alcohol, balance, body, carbonation, aftertaste, special ingredients and style-specific flavors
- Overall Impression – 10 points
  - Overall drinking pleasure, suggestions for improvement

Mead Score Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outstanding</td>
<td>(45 - 50)</td>
<td>World-class example of style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>(38 - 44)</td>
<td>Exemplifies style well, requires minor fine-tuning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>(30 - 37)</td>
<td>Generally within style parameters, some minor flaws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>(21 - 29)</td>
<td>Misses the mark on style and/or minor flaws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>(14 - 20)</td>
<td>Off flavors, aromas or major style deficiencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic</td>
<td>(0 - 13)</td>
<td>Major off flavors and aromas dominate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three Scoring Approaches

- **Top-down**
  - Pick final score then deduct points for each deficient characteristic
  - Difficult to ensure points for each section are aligned with the comments

- **Bottom-up**
  - Assign score for each section, deducting points for each deficiency, then total score
  - Can arrive at a score that does not agree with the overall impression

- **Neutral start**
  - Start in middle +/- based on better/worse than average mead

Step-by-step Process

- Evaluate all the meads at the same serving temperature
- Prepare the scoresheet
- Examine the bottle – no points for this but it can provide clues for later
  - Sediment in bottle, fill level, ring around the neck
- Open the bottle and pour
  - 1-3 ounces per glass
  - Rouse a head if possible, adjust pour height accordingly

Aroma

- Swirl the glass, tilt, inhale deeply for a few seconds at lower side of glass
- Swirl the glass, tilt, inhale deeply at upper side of glass
- Repeat in the middle of the glass
- Swirl, keep level, smell above the glass
- Looking for as many different aromas as you can find

Aroma - honey

- Assess the honey character
  - How intense is it?
  - Is it sweet?
  - Does it have an identifiable varietal character?
  - Is it floral, herbal, fruity, spicy, other?
  - Name the specific aromatics

Aroma - fermentation

- Assess the fermentation characteristics
  - Did the yeast provide any aromatics?
    - Spice, fruit,...
  - Is alcohol noted?
    - Is it sharp, aggressive, overwhelming – if so negative
    - Level should match the style
  - Are there fermentation faults?
  - Is a specific yeast mentioned?
  - Overall character; clean, fresh, dirty, yeasty, ...

Aroma - special ingredients

- If special ingredients were used can you detect them?
- Fermentable ingredients generally have a different impression after fermentation
- Declared special ingredients should be noticeable
  - But balanced with other ingredients
Aroma  - acidity & special processing
- Acidity can be sensed, not tannin
  - From fruit or yeast more apparent than plain acid additions
- Special processing apparent?
  - Oak aging – woody, toasty, vanilla, ...
  - Icing
  - Intentional oxidation ala some Polish meads

Aroma  - balance
- Overall balance = harmony and pleasantness
- Do ingredients complement each other?
- Consider the style and declared attributes
- Does it have off aromas?

Appearance - color
- Describe the color
  - Start with hue/shade
    - E.g., water-white, straw, yellow, amber, ...
    - Expand with pale/dark, medium, deep/dark
  - Melomels & pyments bring a broad range of colors
- Saturation/intensity of color
  - Think like deep scarlet vs pink

Appearance – purity & reflectance
- Purity is the appropriate color for age
  - Brownish, dull, muted colors can suggest age
  - No water edge (meniscus)
  - Color variation at the rim indicates age
  - Dulled colors can indicate oxidation
- Reflectance - mirror like surface = good
  - Dull – lack of fining, possible spoilage

Appearance - clarity
- Note clarity
  - Cloudy, clear, turbid, opaque, muddy, brilliant
  - Presence of crystals, flakes, particulates
  - Beware of condensation on glass
  - Lace or legs on the glass?
  - Go back and smell the mead again, note any additional perceptions

Appearance - legs
- Legs – indication of body, alcohol level & sweetness
  - Nothing to do with quality
  - Longer they last the more body, sugar, alcohol
## Appearance - carbonation
- Not all meads are carbonated
- Note height of foam – quantity
- How fast the bubbles form – rate
- How long head persists – duration
- Note size of bubbles
- Are bubbles on bottom of glass, do they rise
- Is it still, petillant, sparkling
  - Still can have a few bubbles
  - Sparkling needn’t be like soda

## Flavor – basic techniques
- Take a small sip into front of your mouth
  - Swish the tip of your tongue through it
  - Swish it through your mouth
- Take a sip and let sit on top of tongue
- Aerate by breathing over it via your mouth
- Sip and swallow focusing on the aftertaste
  - After swallowing, close mouth, exhale through nose
- Techniques can be combined but be consistent for the flight

## Flavor – honey
- Characterize honey flavors and sweetness
  - Distinct, clean honey flavor or muddy and indistinct?
  - Varietal characteristic: distinct/unmistakable or generic?
  - Does honey meld with other flavors?
  - How strong/intense is honey flavor?
  - Honey floral, spicy, herbal, other?

## Flavor – sweetness
- What level of sweetness?
  - Bone-dry, dry, off-dry, slightly sweet, moderately sweet, moderately-high sweet, sweet, very sweet, or cloyingly sweet
  - Don’t confuse fruitiness or honey flavor with sweetness

## Flavor – acidity
- Acidity – tingle, tartness, zing, liveliness
  - Flat or flabby = not enough acid
  - Pleasant = balanced
  - Tart = acidity is forward
  - Sour/acidic = high acidity
  - Low acidity is soft, plump, smooth
  - High acidity is crisp, tangy, tingly, mouthwatering
  - Acidity isn’t absolute, rather in balance to sweetness

## Flavor – tannin
- Tannin – while also part of mouthfeel can contribute dryness to a mead
- Works with acid to balance sweetness
- Acidity and tannin combined are also called structure.
Flavor – alcohol and bitterness

- Alcohol – has a flavor but typically sensed as
  - Warming – good
  - Burning/hot - bad
- Higher levels of alcohol can contribute bitterness
- Bitterness is uncommon in meads, some ingredients contribute
- Alcohol and bitterness play in the balance

Flavor – balance

- Balance is relative to the style and its attributes
  - Sweetness, strength, carbonation, special ingredients
- Balance does not mean flavors are equal in proportion or intensity
  - A sweet mead will have more sweetness than a dry mead but both can be balanced
  - A sweet mead requires sufficient acidity and/or tannin or it will be flabby
- Individual components complement each other

Flavor – balance continued

- Identify if any components are too strong or weak
- Does any component overshadow the mead, taking style into account?
- Is any component lacking?
- Are special ingredients identifiable but not dominant

Flavor – mouthfeel (body, carbonation, warmth)

- Straightforward aspects of mouthfeel are the same as for beer
  - Body
    - Perception of body is influenced by alcohol and sweetness, stronger/sweeter meads will have more body
  - Carbonation
  - Alcohol warmth
    - Hot/solventy is always negative

Flavor - mouthfeel (acidity)

- Acidity can be noted if it becomes sharp, puckering or tingly.
- Well-balanced acidity should be covered under flavor.
- High levels of acidity can affect M/F negatively
Flavor - mouthfeel (tannins)

● Tannins affect M/F. Common characteristics include:
  ● Astringency
  ● Dryness
  ● Puckering
  ● Note any of them
● Pleasant balance not in M/F but excessive tannins should be mentioned
● Oaking can add tannins plus flavors

Flavor – special ingredients

● Special ingredients and processes add another realm of flavors
  ● Fruit, spices, malt, oak, …
● Some honeys and yeast can produce flavors that mimic fruit and spices
● If special ingredients are declared they should be noticeable and generally identifiable while being balanced and harmonious with other ingredients
● Try to name or describe each flavor characteristic, provide an intensity

Overall Impression

● Give a general impression of the mead
● Avoid personal pronouns
● Give objective comments on how the mead meets the style
● If flaws were noted, point out possible causes

Finishing up

● Complete the numerical scores
● Complete the Stylistic Accuracy, Technical Merit, and Intangibles scales
● Check your math
● Arrive at consensus with your co-judges

General Stuff

● Avoid negative comments, just describe what you perceive the mead
● Do not be overly specific, you do not know how the mead was made
  ● Generally OK, to suggest fermentation changes
  ● Suspect, mash changes – could be an extract based braggot

Scoring hints

● Clearly out of style – maximum of 30
● Clearly of style with no technical faults – minimum of 21
● A single bad fault – maximum of 25
● A bad infection – maximum of 20
● Quantitative levels (e.g., sweet vs dry)
  ● Two levels off = -3 points
  ● One level off = -1 point