

Judging Mead

Steve Piatz
sjpiatz@gmail.com

1

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Piatz

2

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Piatz

3

What is Mead Judging – cont'd?

- Much in common with wine judging
- Less in common with beer judging

Copyright 2010 Steve Piatz

4

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Piatz

5

Mead Score Categories

Outstanding	(45 - 50)	World-class example of style
Excellent	(38 - 44)	Exemplifies style well, requires minor fine-tuning
Very Good	(30 - 37)	Generally within style parameters, some minor flaws
Good	(21 - 29)	Misses the mark on style and/or minor flaws
Fair	(14 - 20)	Off flavors, aromas or major style deficiencies
Problematic	(0 - 13)	Major off flavors and aromas dominate

Copyright 2010 Steve Piatz

6

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

7

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

8

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

9

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

10

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, ...

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

11

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

12

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

13

Aroma - balance

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

14

Appearance - color

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

15

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

16

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

17

Appearance - legs

- Legs – indication of body, alcohol level & sweetness
- Nothing to do with quality
- Longer they last the more body, sugar, alcohol

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

18

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

19

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

20

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?

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

21

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

22

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

23

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.

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

24

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platiz

25

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platiz

26

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platiz

27

Flavor – balance continued

- Meads should not be one dimensional; they do need character
 - They are not all complex
 - Dry, delicate, restrained meads can be wonderful
- A dry hydromel can not be equal to a sweet sack mead in complexity and character
 - Judge each on balance relative to the style

Copyright 2010 Steve Platiz

28

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platiz

29

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platiz

30

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

31

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

32

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

33

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

34

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

35

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

Copyright 2010 Steve Platz

36