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ILLUSTRATION BY MARK STIVERS



DRINK

# The bees' mead

BY JAMES RAIK

Several years ago, a friend owed Dan Slort a favor, so she made him a logo for the ages. It features a stretched violin shaped like an "S" as in the famed 17th century string instrument maker Antonio Stradivari. A honeycomb encircles all but the neck of the violin and bees fly over the image.

It all represents the family history of Strad Meadery in Rancho Cordova. Along with Dueling Dogs Brewing Co. in Lincoln, Strad is producing and serving fermented honey, or mead. Mead was once called the "nectar of the gods;" often, it's referred to as "bee booze."

Regardless of its name, legend details ancient pottery in China dating to 9,000 B.C. containing a liquid that was a combination of grain and honey.

Modern-day mead is fermented with three basic ingredients: honey, yeast and water. Although specialty mead has a higher alcohol content, mead usually has 7.5 to 8% alcohol by volume, about half the amount of wine. It's slightly carbonated and served cold.

"The Vikings and Celts all drank fermented honey because that's all they could get," Slort said. "Any culture that had alcohol started with mead because if you have honey and it gets wet, it turns into magic water."

Although he didn't play a Stradivarius, Slort's grandfather played the violin for most of his 96 years. Strad, founded in 2011, serves several varieties of mead in bottles and on tap, all honoring the family patriarch.

Ingredients at Strad and at Dueling Dogs Brewing Co. are simple. Strad uses Sacramento

wildflower honey made from local flowers and bees. Slort also sometimes uses white clover honey from Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Dueling Dogs does the same.

"We use local honey. It's from Bear River Honey in Sheridan," said Adriana Stephens, who with her husband Earl started Dueling Dogs in 2014 and is its mead maker. "But we also use Oregon honey and California Orange Blossom Honey. It's from all over; wherever I can get it."

Both businesses rotate their mead offerings. Strad's selections usually include apricot, pomegranate strawberry, cherry and a traditional honey-only recipe. Dueling Dogs' mead varies with the season: mandarin to apple, blueberry to strawberry. It also offers braggot, a mead made with honey and barley malt.

Slort explained in jest that all worker bees are female and he has billions of little worker bees. But he receives his honey usually in 55-gallon drums.

"People will come in because they've heard of mead. They never tried it, but they're curious about it," Stephens said. "Most people are like, 'Wow, that's different. But it's good.'"

A consummate advocate of mead and other adult beverages, Slort often references the history of mead.

"It's been around a long time, but it's kind of out of favor," Slort said. "In the 16th-17th century, Shakespeare drank mead when he had the money. When he didn't, he drank beer. People of money then would drink mead because only a peasant would drink beer."

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