



Sunset Heights' Pollen Angels line of meads is currently on tap at six establishments in the province. PHOTO: JOHN WAY



Currently, Pollen Angels has about 10 varieties of mead in its roster ranging from about five to 15 per cent alcohol by volume. Most are in permanent production and a few change with the seasons. PHOTO: JOHN WAY



Sunset Heights' honey is farmed from the on-site apiary's 50 hives, supplemented with honey produced by a Moncton-area beekeeper. PHOTO: JOHN WAY



Sunset Heights' secondary fermenters. PHOTO: JOHN WAY

McLeod Hill meadery making waves

Sunset Heights started selling its award-winning mead in October, and with the list of distributors steadily growing, Victoria Dekker finds what all the buzz is about concerning this fermented honey beverage

All Deb Way wanted was something she could drink.

Her husband John brewed pretty decent all-grain beer, but it wasn't quite to her taste. With four kegs on tap in the couple's living room, it was only fair he brew something just for her.

"It started as a carbonated wine product," John said. "Twenty years later, it morphed into a carbonated mead product. When all my brewing buddies tasted it for the first time, they all said, 'Oh my god, you need to sell this!'"

Today, the McLeod Hill family operates the province's sole meadery, dubbed Sunset Heights. It has been licensed for more than a year, but its first sales hit the books in late October. Although it's a relatively young business, John is rapidly gaining a reputation around these parts as a damn good mazer.

If you aren't acquainted with the term, mead is, simply, a fermented honey beverage. It comes in a handful of blends called melomels, braggots and cysers, respectively fermented with fruit, malted grain and apple juice. Similar to beer, wine and cider, flavours range from sweet to dry, offset by a variety of unique optional ingredients.

"Mead is such a malleable and variable product ... it's not beer and it's not wine, so prepare for something different," John said.

Sunset Heights' "Pollen Angels" line of meads is currently on tap at six establishments in the province. And though the Ways aim to keep the operation small, the list of distributors is steadily growing as the buzz on mead grows louder.

While it's often regarded historically as the go-to drink at Viking feasts or medieval fairs, the origins of mead are older still – way older. Archeological studies suggest it may be mankind's oldest fermented beverage, the first evidence of its existence dating back to China circa 7000 BC.

And though it's never quite disappeared, mead has become the subject of renewed attention in North America in recent years. A study by the American Mead Makers Association states the number of producers in the United States has grown by 130 per cent since 2011, making it the fastest-growing alcoholic beverage market in the country.

"The best part of the mead world right now is that it's so small, the greatest impetus within the whole group is to make sure everybody who's marketing anything called mead is something people want to drink," says John, describing the accessible, co-operative community of mazers breaking new ground in the North American beverage market.

Like a vintner's grapes and a brewer's grain, a mazer's honey is the most vital and determinate ingredient in the flavour of the finished product. The taste of a honey is entirely dependant on the pollen the bees gather. It's an intriguing element of the process, as the options for experimentation change as new pollinating wildflowers emerge through



John Way works on a batch at Sunset Heights. PHOTO: JOHN WAY

the growing seasons.

Sunset Heights' honey is farmed from the on-site apiary's 50 hives, supplemented with honey produced by a Moncton-area beekeeper. Production hinges on the availability of local ingredients, and Pollen Angels current line is made entirely of regional offerings.

To produce a batch, a massive 500-litre fermenter (Sunset Heights has four) is filled with 375 pounds of honey then diluted with fruit juices. While the apple is the predominant fermenting juice, John regularly includes blueberry, blackberry, cherry, cranberry and strawberry in the secondary stage. He's also experimented with varieties of herbs, including rosemary, sage and thyme, and seemingly odd fruits and veggies including tomato and pumpkin.

"Every batch is different," John explains. "We can never count on the combination of wildflower being anything close to what it was in the last batch."

Currently, Pollen Angels has about 10 varieties of mead in its roster ranging from about five to 15 per cent alcohol by volume. Most are in permanent production and a few change with the seasons. The flagship, Queen's Nectar, represents the foundation recipe of apples and honey. Plaid uses maple syrup, while Denim uses blueberries and Tart'n uses cranberries. A line of curious mead-iced tea hybrids is planned for future releases, with one, dubbed Naughtea, available now. The first seasonal release, a mix of vanilla, cinnamon and apples appropriately called Cozy, was debuted at the end of November.

Pollen Angels meads are currently available at five Fredericton restos: Isaac's Way, 540 Kitchen and Bar, James Joyce Irish Pub, The Grad House and The Blue Door. Ducky's in Sackville will become the first watering hole outside the capital city area to offer the ancient elixir,

with an on-tap debut scheduled early in the new year.

Pollen Angels is intended to be the large-volume label, while Sunset Heights meads will eventually be distributed in small, artisanal batches in single-release bottled runs. They'll be experimental, exclusive expressions, like the upcoming July release of Arthur's Fallen Spruce, a batch made with spruce tips harvested from a giant tree felled during post-tropical storm Arthur.

And while it all sounds good, how do drinkers rate the taste? The company's respective social media pages have only modest followings, but word is quickly spreading among locals, says Blue Door manager Mike Babineau.

"It's been going over really well," he said, adding the revered capital city eatery will debut a new menu in January with suggested plates to pair with Pollen Angels meads.

"Some people are coming in specifically for it. To other people, we're mentioning that we have it – a lot of it is just education. A lot of people aren't really aware of what mead is ... the people who like it really enjoy it."

Experts seem to share the sentiment. In March, Sunset Heights took two awards at the 2014 Mazer Cup International Mead Competition: gold for its Sunset Blues Cyser and silver for its Dry Hopped Cyser.

More importantly, though, how does Deb like it?

"She loves her mead. She drinks Pollen Angels every night," John said. "She's one of those 'supertasters' who actually has the ability to taste things other people don't taste. She tastes every batch."

Victoria Dekker

A Moncton-based freelance journalist. She can be reached at victoria.e.dekker@gmail.com.

One holiday quandary solved



JAY REMER
the etiquette guy

One of the most gratifying parts of writing this column every week is the opportunity to make at least a small difference in people's lives.

A reader recently sent me this rather long question but one that reflects quandaries we all face from time to time, especially around Christmas and other big family celebrations. My reply is short and to the point. Then follows a wonderful note of acknowledgment,

which encourages me to carry on enjoying the time I spend connecting in this way with hundreds of readers every year. It is not my job to provide answers as much as it is to create a mental space for you to find the answers within yourself.

The question: My mother hosts Christmas dinner every year, since I live more than 1,120 kilometres away from my whole family and it is not feasible for the entire family to drive to my house. We stay in our trailer when we are down visiting my family. Every year I help my mother with the cooking, cleaning, prepping and buying the meal. For the past four years, I have always brought the prime rib roast, a side dish, the fresh-baked sourdough and french bread loaves, wine and a couple of pies. My brothers and sister do not contribute any food or help with the cooking and cleanup. My mother always asks that I bring a large roast so that she has leftovers for the following day, which I always do. Last year, I brought a very large roast and when it came time for us to leave, my mother told me to take some leftovers. I was

very happy about this because we had a long drive home and I knew it would be several days before I could get to the market. I started to pack some of the

I'm not feeling much Christmas spirit in this question. This time of year is about giving, not hoarding. Here is my advice: take a roast that feeds exactly enough for the meal.

meat and she came into the kitchen and told me that she had already packed meat for me. She gave me a tiny bag of about four slices of roast beef. I told her that I would like to take more home for

my son (who was unable to make it for Christmas), and she told me she needed it for her and my dad. Certainly, that wasn't enough meat for more than one meal on the road. Last week, she asked that I bring the roast again this year. I told her I would but that I would be taking some extra meat home. She complained that I should buy a larger roast if I plan on doing that. I reminded her that she was also serving a ham and that if people want leftovers for several days they can eat the ham. I know that the host is not obliged to give out leftovers. However, I feel that when one of the guests brings most of the food, shouldn't they be offered a reasonable amount of leftovers?

My answer: I'm not feeling much Christmas spirit in this question. This time of year is about giving, not hoarding. Here is my advice: take a roast that feeds exactly enough for the meal. There will be no leftovers to squabble over. Figure out your road trip meals separately. Everyone should be given the same amount of leftovers, if leftovers are shared at all. I hope this helps. Have a very Merry Christmas and

remember to be grateful for your many blessings.

Questioner's response: Hi Jay. Merry Christmas! Thank you for your insight. It helped me to realize that I wasn't feeling the Christmas spirit from my family either, so I decided to cancel my plans to visit my family down south. Instead I stayed home with my husband and son and celebrated a stress- and drama-free Christmas. I made the right choice and am so happy with my decision. Today has been one of the happiest Christmases I've had in a long time. I'm so glad that I read your column. I wish you and your family a safe and happy holiday season. Thank you again.

I would like to thank you for continuing to enjoy reading this column as I enjoy writing it, and to wish you all the most joyous of new year's, where happiness, love, safety and good health abound.

Jay Remer

jay@etiquetteguy.com
Certified by the Protocol School of Washington, Jay Remer lives in Saint Andrews