

Mead Is Having a Moment

Clear Skies Meadery wants to make the world's oldest alcoholic beverage popular again

BY ISABELLA GOODMAN

MEAD IS A DRINK you'd expect to find at a Renaissance fair, not in the Kentlands. But longtime friends Manisha Eigner and Yancy Bodenstein are hoping to bring the alcoholic beverage back into popularity at their new taproom, Clear Skies Meadery, in Gaithersburg.

So what is mead? It starts with three basic ingredients: honey, water and yeast. And while it looks a little like beer, don't be fooled—"Mead is very much its own thing," says Eigner, head of business operations at Clear Skies. "It has similar characteristics to wine, but you'll always have those background notes of honey."

Meads can range from sweet to dry, and the menu at Clear Skies offers suggestions based on the kind of wine you prefer. If Chardonnay is your drink of choice, try the dry mead. Or, if sangria is more your taste, their seasonal blackberry mead will hit the spot. Every mead is made in-house, without preservatives or additives, and aged for three to six months with dried spices, fruit or fruit purees.

For many, a drink in the Kentlands meadery will be their first exposure to the beverage. Clear Skies is the only mead taproom in the county and one of only four in Maryland. "What's fun is you have people come in with an open mind or they're just really curious, so it's fun to see people's facial reactions," says Bodenstein.

Meadmaker Bodenstein has been perfecting his mead recipe for over 17 years in his backyard and says he's come a long way from that first batch. His chemistry background was no doubt a help, and he now splits his time between working at the National Institutes of Health and brewing mead with his two assistant brewers.

After years of drinking Bodenstein's homemade meads, Eigner knew that it could be the start of something big. Eigner, who also has a background in science, had no prior customer service experience and learned as much as she could about starting a business. She took her experience in labs, applied all she learned about attention to detail and teamwork, then set out to create a top-notch establishment. The friends' initial plans for a meadery started to come together at the start of 2019, and after a year-long process of renovations, hearings and inspections, Eigner and Bodenstein finally opened Clear Skies in March 2020—just as the pandemic hit.

They never initially planned to do takeout orders, says Eigner, because they wanted the taproom to be a place for the community. But when the shutdown order went into effect, they quickly had to adapt to delivery and request permits for expanded outdoor



Meadmaster Yancy Bodenstein's recipe has been 17 years in the making.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY
CLEAR SKIES MEADERY



seating. Now, as restrictions are easing up, business is almost back to normal, but this is just the start for Clear Skies Meadery.

Cautiously optimistic, Eigner and Bodenstein plan to expand by focusing on the connection to their community, whether that's by hosting more local events or getting their meads in cans and on tap at establishments across Montgomery County.

Eigner hopes that they can become a quintessential part of the neighborhood, a place for people to gather and bond over a glass of mead. Even though mead is an ancient drink, Clear Skies' steampunk-inspired taproom is far from outdated—they've struck a balance between antique décor elements with modern finishes.

"Years ago, if someone asked if I ever expected to own a taproom, I would've said, 'No, I'm a scientist. My work is behind the scenes,'" says Eigner. "This is all very new, and I'm enjoying every minute of it. I love seeing happy customers and people who keep coming back. It means we connected with them." **MM**



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Community is an important part of Clear Skies Meadery

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