

West Virginia's Honey River Meadery Treasures Its Old World Style

by MARY AND BILL WEAVER

Photos by Kenny Kemp of the Charleston Gazette

Wine bottles by Erika May – from left, specialty tulip poplar mead, red raspberry melomel (fruit mead), and pyment (grape mead.) Note attractive color-coordinated packaging.

How do you define success? What is the good life? Many new college grads in the early 1990's answered these questions by heading to corporate America, looking forward to an accumulation of wealth.

Ben McKean, however, had very different ideas. He headed for the West Virginia mountains near Monongahela National Forest, attracted by the availability of whitewater rafting, hiking, and other outdoor activities. He purchased and began rehabilitating an 80 acre abandoned farm, on a south-facing slope so the soil would warm more quickly in spring.

"I wanted to be far enough away from urban areas to encourage myself to have a healthier and more self-reliant lifestyle," he explained. Ever since he began operating his Healthberry Farm in 1994, he has produced much of his own food. He experimented with growing vegetables for market. "I wanted to make my living in agriculture," he recalls, but the specifics of how he would accomplish that were at first somewhat open-ended.

As fate would have it, although McKean himself was not yet a beekeeper, West Virginia, his new home, also happened to be one of the best states in the east for beekeeping. In addition, his Healthberry Farm was located near the home of an exceptional Hungarian immigrant, beekeeper and mead maker, Ferenc Androczi.

One day in 1994, McKean was exploring the area and decided to follow a sign near Buckhannon, West Virginia that intrigued him: "Little Hungary Farm Winery." That day, he met the elderly gentleman who was



Ben stirs the grapes for his pyment with a wooden paddle. He uses "whole berry fermentation," (described in article), a low-tech but effective way of avoiding having to purchase expensive de-stemming and crushing equipment when using red grapes.

to become his mentor, and who would help to chart the future direction of Healthberry Farm.

The meeting was also a life-changing one for Androczi. In his 70's, he had a tremendous amount of Old World style mead-making information to pass along. He was anxious to teach his skills to another younger person who could keep them alive for the next generation.

"Frank," as he was called, was already well into his 70's and worked alone, keeping his 50 hives of bees, raising grapes, apples, and pears for his fruit mead or Melomel, and making and selling his product. Not every newly minted college grad would have been interested in spending time with, and learning a possibly not-too-salable heritage art, from an elderly man who was overwhelmed by trying to do too much hard work by himself. Fortunately, McKean was not your average 20-something young man. He was able to see the potential opportunities in the situation, both for himself and for Frank.

McKean was fascinated by Frank's story of having been a lawyer in Hungary and being imprisoned after the Communist takeover. Frank's escape from the Communist prison camp after seven months' incarceration, and his success in making his way to Austria, and from there to the United States in 1952, knowing no English, and with



Erika and Ben take a break together in the honey house.

only the shirt on his back, spoke volumes to McKean about the old man's resilience and character.

Once in America, Frank lost no time in learning English and getting a Master's degree and then a PhD in library science. When he retired from West Virginia Wesleyan University as a full professor, (he'd been attracted to the library position in the West Virginia mountains because they reminded him of his native Hungary), he was ready to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather in Hungary and open his own meadery, the first in the state of West Virginia.

Over time, McKean and Androczi estab-

lished a friendship and an informal mentorship. "I bought my first five hives in 1995," explained McKean, "and started planting fruit on Healthberry Farm. I was inspired by Frank, and I learned everything about beekeeping from him. I hadn't yet decided on a meadery of my own, but I was fascinated by what he was doing.

"I would stop in and ask him, 'Can I help you?' and that way, I was able to learn a lot about what he was doing. He became a very dear friend."

To the good fortune of both McKean and Androczi, Ben learned through Augusta Heritage Arts in Elkins, West Virginia, where had he taken some (unrelated) courses, that he might be eligible for a fully funded apprenticeship for them both. Old World style mead making was recognized as a heritage art in danger of being lost.

Ben filled out an application, and the paid apprenticeship replaced their informal mentorship for 1999-2000. "The grant was set up for one year, one day per week, so I could get a feel for all the stages in the process of keeping the bees, extracting the honey crop, raising the fruit, and making the melomel [fruit mead]."

When the grant ended, McKean continued the mentorship on his own.

Near the end of McKean's mentorship, Frank, by then in his 80's suffered a stroke. He lived several more years, but was never able to be active in his beloved meadery again. Ben McKean managed the business for him before he passed away at 85.

"During that time, I had the opportunity to learn about what taxes are required for the winery, and what forms and records I had to keep. I also got to try some marketing strategies that Frank had never explored that have proved to be very successful.

"I think Frank would be proud to see that I'm actually seeing it through," he continued. With McKean, and possibly others who learned from Frank before McKean met him, Frank's Old World folk art, passed

down through generations of the Androczi family, lives on.

Because the Old World methods produce meads with a richer, earthier, fuller flavor than the sometimes filtered, sanitized, and sterilized meads sold commercially today, McKean believes other beekeepers may be interested in trying them.

On his Own with Honey River Meadery

McKean bottled his first meads in 2013, after 15 years of plowing his profits from his honey sales back into his beekeeping business.

"Honey River Meadery was a full 15 years in the making," he continued. But today he is an experienced beekeeper with 90 hives (with plans to perhaps increase that number to 120) and his own meadery. Although he still sells bottled honey, most of his crop now goes into the production of his specialty varietal meads, pyment (grape mead,) and melomel (fruit mead, made with own his estate grown Everbearing red raspberries and also with West Virginia grown organic blueberries, for a separate and distinct type of melomel.)

Honey River Meadery's varietal meads include tulip poplar, one of the area's main honey crops, and basswood, from summer honeys, and goldenrod/aster from his fall honey crop. Surprisingly, he says the goldenrod/aster varietal mead has a unique, citrusy flavor. "My mead is naturally effervescent," McKean added.

"I specialize in varietal meads. I want to highlight the distinctly different flavor of mead that each honey produces. To get the honey for the varietal meads, I extract three times a year. The spring honey is left for the bees, and I'm careful to leave enough honey on the hives for winter. My bees winter better on honey than sugar syrup, which I use only in emergencies to prevent starvation."

The pyment, melomels, and specialty meads provide an interesting line-up of flavors for customers to try. They can currently be purchased at his home, Healthberry Farm and Honey River Meadery, in Dryfork, West Virginia, at two other local outlets, and at the many fairs and festivals across West Virginia where McKean sets up a stand to sell his wares, as do so many other West Virginia food and beverage producers.

AgriTourism and Farm Tours:

Other Sales Opportunities

West Virginia agritourism is another important source of honey, mead, pyment, and melomel sales. "I love to give farm tours. It gives me a chance to explain how the bees survive and interact, and about the importance of the plants that sustain them. I'm helping people connect with the foods they eat. They can see the hives that produced the honey that is in their mead. So many people today know so little about the natural world and the origins of their food."

McKean takes advantage of the current trend to buy local. Everything about his products is local: the honeys, the fruits, the grapes, even the designer of his care-



Extracting time. Erika May moves bucket of freshly extracted honey. The honey contains cappings, which are included in the mix for the primary fermentation of the mead.

fully thought-out, whimsical labels and the maker of his wooden paddle for mixing the honey into the meads.

His “Made in West Virginia from Local Ingredients” theme doesn’t only resonate with West Virginians. McKean has found a ready clientele for his products in the owners of cottages in the area who come from Washington DC and Richmond. These cottage owners attracted to his area, as he was, by the large, forested, unspoiled areas, and the opportunities for skiing, hiking, and whitewater rafting, for which McKean still acts as a guide.

These urban folks have been very open to testing new ideas, including that hazy mead with some sediment (like McKean’s Old World style mead) has a better flavor. They have also been anxious to buy bottles of his meads, piment, and melomels to take back to the city to remind them of their wilderness summer homes. As a group, they, like McKean, consider raw, unprocessed foods to be especially healthy.

West Virginia is for Beekeepers!

“West Virginia is a great state to keep bees in,” McKean explained. There is a diversity of dependable nectar-producing trees and wild plants, which vary at the many different elevations the state of West Virginia offers.

Because the area is so mountainous, there is no large-scale agriculture here, and most of the smaller farmers in the state simply can’t afford to spray pesticides. “Out of all the cases of hive deaths that the West Virginia Apiary inspectors were called to check, they found no cases of Colony Collapse Disorder,” McKean continued. “The inspectors determined other causes for all the cases of bee mortality that they checked in the state.”

According to McKean, more and more beekeepers are moving from other states to West Virginia, because it is a better place to keep bees. Since most West Virginia beekeepers are hobbyists, there is room for the newcomers.

West Virginia beekeepers also have a very supportive department of Agriculture, and an excellent resource in West Virginia’s very knowledgeable and capable State Apiarist, Paul Poling, himself a successful commercial beekeeper in the state for many years.

Poling was personally very helpful to Ben McKean. “Shortly after Frank’s death, I knew that, although I understood how to keep a small number of hives, I needed to learn the techniques for taking care of a large number of hives efficiently and successfully.”

To give him the experience and knowledge he needed, Paul Poling hired him to work bees on a commercial scale for Poling’s Mountain State Honey Company for the 2007 season. McKean’s experiences that summer gave him the additional knowledge he needed before greatly expanding his own hive numbers to be ready to establish Honey River Meadery.



Some of Honey River Meadery’s products, from left, red raspberry melomel (fruit mead), piment (grape mead), specialty mead made from basswood honey, specialty mead made from tulip poplar honey, blueberry melomel. Note the color coordinated packaging, and the carefully designed, whimsical Honey River labels.

Old World Mead-Making

Frank’s methods were simple, low input methods, but they produce delicious mead. Unlike many commercial mead makers in the US 20+ years ago, Frank used raw honey, which preserves all the delicate aromas and complex flavors in honey that are easily lost when honey is heated.

Mead made using Old World methods also looks different from today’s commercial meads. Old World mead is hazy, rather than crystal clear, and contains sediment. It also has more flavor variance from year to year. “I appreciate that variance,” said McKean. “It celebrates this year’s crop. I try to educate consumers that the haze is an indicator of something good and sought-after.”

As for the sediment, “Frank told me he

wouldn’t buy mead without sediment. He said the sediment was the healthiest part of the wine.” Sediment, however, is clearly a turn-off to some modern American consumers. “When they see sediment, they think the stuff is spoiled.”

So McKean is making just a bit of a change in the Old World methods he learned from Frank to make his piment and melomel more acceptable to today’s American consumers. He believes Frank would want him to, and with good reason.

“Mead making was a family tradition that gave Frank a direct connection to his Father and Grandfather. Frank told me over and over how his Father had said, ‘There is no better melomel than mine.’”

“But,” Frank continued, “my Father never had a chance to taste mine.”



Ben and Erika check the stage of bloom on the goldenrod on Healthberry Farm.



Working bees. Note versatile hive stand. Those lids are not going to blow off in a storm! West Virginia Mountains in the background. West VA honey plants are plentiful enough that Ben can set up his yards only 2 miles apart.

“I used to wonder,” mused McKean, “why Frank told me that story so many times. And then one day it was a big flash for me when I realized why. Frank was a literary kind of guy who would teach lessons with stories or songs. He wanted me to understand that he was passing it on to me. Now mine would be the best. He wanted me to take what he was teaching me and make it my own. I must find ways, using the techniques available to me, to make it finer so it would appeal to the next generation.”

McKean still doesn't filter the sediment out of his wines. Unfiltered wines typically have a fuller flavor, he believes. But he does “rack” his wines several times before bottling. “Racking is simply transferring the wine from one container to another, leaving behind some of the sediment each time. When I can, I use gravity to siphon it. If there's less sediment, people don't seem to mind the cloudiness so much.”

There is still sediment in McKean's wine, but not as much as in Frank's, in deference to the expectations of today's American consumers. In a practical sense, it doesn't matter how healthy the sediment might be,

if it's such a turn-off to customers that no one will buy the wine because they're convinced that with so much sediment, it must be spoiled.

A Long, Cool Fermentation Period

Another difference between today's commercial meads and those produced by the Old World methods Frank taught is that, with the Old World methods, the fermentation period is necessarily much longer. This is because no sulfites are added to artificially stop the fermentation process at a certain point so the mead can be bottled.

Making mead by the Old World methods is a much slower process. “Because I don't use sulfites, I have to allow enough time to make sure the fermentation has completely stopped before I bottle my mead,” explained McKean.

“To allow for this, I age my mead for at least two years before bottling. The mead is aged at cool temperatures, in a cellar. Since fermentation slows to almost nothing in the cellar in winter, that two years must include two summers so that the fermentation will be complete.”

McKean's Honey River Meadery is still in its infancy, with his inaugural batch begun in 2012. “I have bottled my first batch of mead from my 2012 summer honeys (tulip poplar and basswood.) The first mead I made from 2012 fall goldenrod and aster will be bottled shortly. I've been working on developing the label.”

“I believe that the prolonged fermentation period my meads undergo, which produces a mead with about 14% alcohol, allows the mead to mellow and settle, and lets the flavors develop to more of their peak. Mead is well suited to aging. Also, using a method that allows me to bottle without sulfites makes my mead rare and unique, because it's expensive to wait two years before bottling [and selling!] the mead. It's traditional in Europe to age a mead for eleven years before drinking it, although this long a wait would probably be found in a private cellar or personal collection.”

More honey per bottle of mead

McKean's meads also contain a larger amount of honey than many meads. By law, a mead must be made from a mixture that is at least 51 per cent honey. “But I am a beekeeper,” explained McKean. “I produce honey. I can afford to be generous with my honey. My finished meads have about ¾ of a pound of honey in each full bottle of mead. My trademark is a sweet, dessert mead.

“My pyment finishes rich and silky on the palate because it still has, in addition to the sweetness of the grapes, close to ¾ of a pound of honey in a bottle. It doesn't need to have that. That's my style. It's almost a port style wine, although it's not fortified with brandy the way port is. I want my mead to celebrate the flavors of the local honey, which is wonderful food. This is my choice. Some people prefer a dry mead with less honey and sweetness.”

McKean's pyment is only made with red grapes, because in the initial 10 days of fermentation with the skins, the red color and tannic acids dissolve into the wine for a richer, more robust flavor, as well as added health benefits from the antioxidants and phenols found in the red skins. He was happy to find a nearby supply of Cham-



(l) Ben checks shallow frame for incoming nectar. (r) Ben and Erika finished checking yard.

bourcin red grapes, a variety he considers excellent for making pyment, at Kopple Vineyard.

After those initial 10 days of fermentation with the skins, the juice is pressed out of the “must” and mixed with his dark, full-flavored tulip poplar honey.

Making Pyment - No Destemmer/Crusher needed!

This is a departure from Frank’s methods that McKean found that greatly simplifies making small batches of grape mead, or pyment. “It’s something any home mead maker can do if they purchase a flat of grapes,” explained McKean, who came across the method, called ‘whole berry fermentation,’ by happenstance. With this method, a lot of the grapes remain whole during the first part of fermentation.

“All you need for this method of fermenting the grapes is a simple wooden paddle. Frank had a destemmer/crusher to prepare his grapes, and I used to take my grapes to a winery with a destemmer/crusher to be processed. But this elaborate preparation isn’t necessary.

“I heard about another vineyard where they were doing ‘whole berry fermentation.’ I asked how they did it.”

McKean was told, “You need a vat, and just enough juice to cover the fruit, which you can press from the uncrushed grapes with the wooden paddle. Otherwise, vinegar-producing yeasts can get a start in the presence of oxygen.

“Check the grapes and juice every day, and if the juice level needs to be little higher to make sure the grapes stay covered, use your wooden paddle to press the grapes to release more juice. Stir daily, using your wooden paddle.

“After a week to ten days of fermentation, even whole grapes can go into the press, and the rest of the juice presses out well.”

What about the stems on the grapes in the clusters that have not been removed? Actually, they were an important part of Frank’s recipe. “After his grapes were destemmed, he added back about half of the stems to the “must” after it was pressed for the primary fermenting. They were part of his recipe.

“He referred to them as ‘pieces of vine,’ and because they are high in tannic acids, they give the mead an earthy, acidic flavor that blends very well with the sweet floral tones of honey. These tiny stems or ‘pieces of vine’ are part of my signature flavor also. The tannins might be too heavy for an all-grape wine, but with the honey, and always using red grapes as I do, the resulting flavor is delicious.”

Minimal-cost fermentation equipment

For the first month after the initial stirring and fermentation, McKean likes to use open-topped containers. They are easier to clean out, and they make possible for the cappings to form a “floating wax lid” that keeps off the outside air. Cappings wax and propolis are both included.



Ben in honey house with crop of specialty meads, pyment, and melomels in sealed fermentation with air locks: in oak barrel (for pyment only); in stainless steel and plastic barrels; and in demijohns, the 15 gallon glass containers in the foreground that are protected by tan and black baskets.

After about a month in the open containers, the wax is skimmed off the top of the containers, and the mead, pyment, and melomel are put into sealed containers with air locks for the remaining fermentation, which takes place in a cellar. The mead and melomel are sealed in stainless steel containers.

The pyment, in honor of his mentor’s methods, spends a year aging in an oak barrel. “The oak adds tannins and blends very well with the pyment,” said McKean, “but I believe it distracts from the plain mead, so I only use oak for the pyment.”

To keep costs down in his fledgling winery, McKean has been able to buy oak barrels and stainless steel containers used, from other wineries, for example, that only used the oak barrels for a month or two. He scrubs them thoroughly to give them a new lease on life. “I pressure wash them. Slowly, with time, I can get them almost like new.”

Yeast Starter and Yeast

McKean adds a yeast starter for all his meads and melomels, although he does not try to kill off the wild yeasts that are already present in the honey and on the fruits. In addition, “I add a Montrachet yeast to the grape ‘must’ at the beginning of fermentation for the pyment.”

Raising Queens and Mite Control

McKean has begun raising about half of his own queens. “I’m doing it from the sustainability aspect. I want to be able to meet my own needs at the farm,” (as he has been growing most of his own food for many years.) He has found queen rearing to be very time-consuming.

“As I’m being more successful, queen rearing is paying off, but the time involved really makes the price of purchased

queens look good. I order the other half of my queens from Ismael Bautista at South Georgia Apiaries. I found him in an ad in *American Bee Journal*. He has been just great to work with.”

McKean’s preferred mite treatment, when there is brood in the hive, is “Mite-Away Quick Strips.” When there is no brood, in November, for example, or with a package or a swarm, “I like HopGuard. HopGuard is safe at any time, but it’s not as effective at penetrating cappings and killing mites in the brood cells as formic acid.”

Coming Full Circle

Ben’s motto is, “Bee happy; bee healthy.” (He is careful to caution against overconsumption of alcohol, from a health standpoint.) What better definition could there be of the good life than keeping active and earning a living by doing what one loves to do?

He’d like to add one thing more, though. He’s looking forward to doing some mentoring himself, to make sure that the Old World mead making methods he learned from Androczi will survive for yet another generation. McKean considers Androczi’s centuries-old family legacy to be a priceless treasure to be passed on to others.

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