

Queen Elizabeth's Methaeglen – A Lochac Laurels' Brewing Challenge

Entrant: Mistress Rohesia le Sarjent – Barony of Southron Gaard

Tan Label Batch 1: As per the recipe &

Green Label Batch 2: Variation with an increased proportion of Sweet Briar

My transcription from the first edition 1609 Facsimile:

*First, gather a bushell of Sweet-briar-leaves, and a bushell of Thyme, half a bushell of Rosemarie, and a pecke of bay-leaves. Seeth al these being well washed in a furnace of faire water: let them boil the space of halfe an howre, or better: and then powre out al the water and herbes into a vate, and let it stand til it be **cold**. Then strain the water fro the herbes, & take to every six gallons of water one gallon of the finest hony,¹ and put it into the **water cold**, and labor it together half an hour: then let it stand two days, stirring it well twice or thrice each day. Then take the liquor and boil it anew: and when it doeth seeth, skim it as long as there remaineth any drosse. When it is clear ², put it into the vate as before, & there let it be cooled. You must then have in a readiness a kive of new ale or beere, which as soon as you have emptied, suddainly whelme it upside downe, and set it up againe, and presently put in the Metheglen, & let it stand three daies a working: and then tun it up in barrels, tying at every tap-hole, by a Pack-thread, a little bag of Cloves and Mace, to the valew of an ounce. It must stand half a year before it be drunk of.*

Words in **bold** differ from the transcription by Justin du Coeur that was given with the competition recipe, which was taken from the third edition of the 'The Feminine Monarchie, or a Treatise concerning Bees and the due ordering of Bees,' 1609 by Charles Butler, rather than the first edition. Notes 1 and 2 are explained later in the section on honey.

“O thou weed, Who art so lovely fair and smell’st so sweet that the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst ne'er been born!” (Shakespeare, *Othello*)

Since Sweet Briar is a declared weed in New Zealand I was afraid it might be difficult to source, but happily I found it growing in profusion on the river banks at the Canterbury Faire site and was able to gather a large bag of it. It was identifiable by it's five petalled pink flowers, downward hooking thorns and strong green apple-like fragrance, which became particularly apparent once in the confines of the plastic bag. The recipe clearly states to use the leaves, which are very fragrant, not the flowers as one might expect. I had thyme, rosemary and bay growing in my own garden.

“Preserving the sweetness of proportion” (Ben Johnson *The Masque of Hymen* 1606)

The recipe tells us to use a bushel* of sweet-briar-leaves, a bushel of thyme, half a bushel of rosemary and a peck of bay-leaves in a “furnace” of fair water however I was unable find any definition of a “furnace” as a liquid measure, so I turned to The Closet of Sir Kenelm Digby Knight Opened for clarification.

(*During the Middle Ages, the bushel of wheat was supposed to weigh 64 tower pounds, but when the tower system was abolished in the 16th century, it was described as 56 avoirdupois pounds, or 25.4 kg [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bushel>] A peck is one quarter of a bushel)

Digby has numerous very similar recipes using combinations of sweet-briar-leaves, thyme, bay, and rosemary, and also sweet marjoram, savoury, and muscovy (musky stork's bill). Generally these recipes call for one handful of each herb for between 8 and 12 gallons of liquid. The lowest proportion being one handful of mixed herbs, in six gallons of water and the highest proportion being 21 handfuls of herbs in 10 gallons of water.

Following Digby's ANOTHER WAY TO MAKE WHITE METHEGLIN, which had the highest concentration of herbs, I used 1 handful of sweet briar (40gm by my approximation), 1 handful of Thyme (40gm), ½ handful of Rosemary (20gm) and ¼ handful of bay-leaves (10gm) (2.75 handfuls total) boiled for half an hour in 1.3 gallons/ 6 ltrs of water. I would have done this over a fire but I live in the city suburbs under a fire ban, so I did this on the kitchen stove instead.

After boiling my herbs I realised that this particular Digby recipe called for the liquor to be clarified with egg whites, which in my experience strip both colour and flavour as well removing cloudiness. This is probably accounts for the unusually high proportion of herbs, about 4-6 times that of most of the other recipes. Digby's final metheglen recipe TO MAKE METHEGLIN says that one handful each of Sweet-bryar, Bays, Rosemary, Thyme, Marjoram, and Savoury is sufficient to make 12 gallons of metheglen! If taken at these proportions the several bushels of herbs called for in the Queen Elizabeth recipe would make 120 odd barrels and my tea would have made 6 or more gallons. Since some of the other Digby recipes just call for the herbs to be boiled “*till the water taste of them*”, I tried diluting my herbal tea at various proportions and tasting it, until I found what seemed like the most pleasant flavour, at a dilution of 1 part herbal tea to three of water.

“Sweet is the rose, but grows upon a briar” (Edmund Spenser Sonnet XXVI. 1552?–1599)

The herbal tea resulting from the 1/1/half/quarter mix of herbs, even when diluted was still soundly dominated by thyme (a flavour I associate with stomach upsets and medical teas) and had lost the charming sweet briar scent, so I divided my “tea” between two large pickling jars and added an extra half a handful of Sweet briar to steep in one of them. The version with the extra sweet briar is my second entry, a deliberate variation from the original recipe.

“The sweetest honey is loathsome in its own deliciousness.” (William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)

Digby says in SOME NOTES ABOUT HONEY;

The Honey of dry open Countries, where there is much Wild-thyme, Rosemary, and Flowers, is best. It is of three sorts, Virgin-honey, Life-honey, and Stock-honey. The first is the best. The Life-honey next. The Virgin-honey is of Bees, that swarmed the Spring before, and are taken up in Autumn; and is made best by chusing [choosing] the Whitest combs of the Hive, and then letting the Honey run out of them lying upon a Sieve without pressing it, or breaking of the Combs. The Life-honey is of the same Combs broken after the Virgin-honey is run from it;

The medieval approach to gathering honey involved breaking up the hive, taking the honey comb and processing the comb in different ways to extract both honey and wax. The best kind was taken from a relatively new hive and simply allowed to drip from the combs. This would be similar to the honey extracted from modern hives through the process of spinning the combs. Further processing, once the best had been extracted, gave a lower quality of honey that had more wax and dross in it.

I used creamed meadow honey from Ashburton, a small town which sits in the middle of sheep and dairy country on the Canterbury plains. The bees here gather nectar primarily from clover, gorse, broom and other English imports. It is likely very close to Medieval English honey and was clean and white with no dross, dregs or wax.

The recipe calls for six gallons of water to one gallon of honey. The honey and water are worked together for half an hour and left to sit for two days, stirring occasionally, then boiled and scummed. From previous experience this is primarily to remove impurities from the honey. Boiling will also evaporate off the water increasing the honey concentration. In comparing this recipe to those in Digby the 6/1 ratio of water to honey is decidedly on the light side. Digby's similar recipes proposing anything from 3/1 to 5/1 proportions of water to honey, frequently with specific instructions that the strength of the honey can not be relied upon for consistency, so the solution must be made strong enough “to bare an egg”. The note 1 within the facsimile of the recipe (see above), but not included in the transcription given says:

If you maruai!e (marvel) that so great a quantitie of water is required it is partly because of the goodnesse of the hony, which being pure and fine goeth further then ordinary: but chiefly that it may have the longer time to be clarified in boiling, before it come to his strength. And therefore some wil have eight parts of water to one of hony: but then they boile it to much the longer.

Side note 2 in the margin of the facsimile which refers to the length of boiling and clarifying calls for “*the third part at least being wasted*” i.e. that the liquid should be reduced by at least a third in other words down to less than 4 gallons of water to 1 gallon of honey.

As my honey was already entirely clarified it seemed unnecessary to re-boil and scum it, so instead I increased the honey concentration to “bare an egg the breadth of a groat” (SG 1.1 approx) and skipped the boil and scum step.

“Three remedies of the physicians of Myddfai: water, honey, and labor.” Welsh Proverb

The recipe calls for the honeyed water to be added to newly emptied ale kive, which was a large wooden bowl used for brewing ale. The instruction is to tip the kive upside down and then right it again, (which will likely distribute the yeasty lees from the ale up the sides of the bowl giving it a light coating of ale yeast all over), then add the honey water. Having not recently brewed any ale, and not owning a kive I chose to add powdered ale yeast to the honey water in two large pickle jars. I used half a packet of Munton's Premium Gold Ale Yeast (6 grams). I didn't have a lot of choice in yeast, as my local brewing shop only had this or a generic draft ale yeast.

With the honey dissolved in the herbed water and cooled to lukewarm I sprinkled the yeast on top as per the instructions on the packet. I put the pickle jar lids on loosely, to keep out any foreign matter but allow gases to escape, and left the jars in a warm dark place to work for three days.

The Queen Elizabeth recipe then tells us to “tun it up in barrels”. Being a little light on instruction I looked to Digby's recipe WHITE METHEGLIN OF MY LADY HUNGERFORD for more detail, which says:

Tun the clear into your vessel (without Barm) and stop it up close, with the Spices in it, till you perceive by the hissing that it begins to work. Then give it some little vent, else the Barrel would break. When it is at the end of the working, stop it up close.

As I had no barrels I syphoned the liquid off into 2 half gallon flagons (large glass bottles 2.27ltrs), which I capped with airlocks, to simulate the confinement of barrels while allowing excess gases to escape. I dropped into each flagon 0.25gms of cloves and mace, and also 1.5 teaspoons of previously used oak chips to add the flavour which would have been imparted by the barrels. Digby's recipes specify used ale or sack barrels for meads and metheglens, not new barrels which would have imparted a much stronger oak flavour.

"Patience and time do more than strength or passion." Jean de La Fontaine

Then I waited, and waited...and waited... After 13 weeks I still had a SG of 1.06 and 1.04 and only 2 months until the competition, and weather temperatures dropping significantly so I added a little yeast nutrient to each flagon in the form of a split pea lump of Marmite dissolved in 60 mls of boiling water, divided between the two. With only 4 weeks until the competition the specific gravity was still high and the weather had got much colder, so I kept the flagons near a heater and shook them daily to encourage fermentation. At 2 weeks before the competition fermentation was still not entirely complete, so I racked off half of each batch at approximately SG 1.04 for the first batch and SG 1.02 for the second batch. I then heat treated it to kill off any remaining yeast, so that it would not explode during transportation and bottled my Metheglen. The remaining half flagons will be left to ferment out fully and bottled when ready. My choice of small plastic bottles was entirely for safety in the post (I send the brew by airmail from New Zealand). If I'd had the option I would have preferred to present the entries in a glass “onion” shaped bottle or ceramic Bellerme bottle as it would have been served in the 16th century.



My Holmgaard Viking Carafe which I would have preferred to present this Metheglen in.

"Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog" Shakespeare MacBeth

My final redaction of the recipe is:

20 g Sweet-briar-leaves (40g for the variant)

20 g Fresh Thyme

10g Fresh Rosemary

5 g Bay Leaves

1.3 gallons/ 6 ltrs water

Boil for half an hour, cool and strain. Then add and dissolve in a third of a gallon / 1.5 ltrs creamed white meadow honey. Cool to lukewarm then sprinkle over 3 gm Munton's Premium Gold Ale Yeast.

Allow it to work for three days, remove from the lees and place under airlock with:

0.5gm Bruised Cloves

0.5 gm Bruised Mace

3 tsp previously used oak chips.

A split peas worth of Marmite dissolved in 60 ml of water as yeast nutrient.

“To make no mistakes is not in the power of man; but from their errors and mistakes the wise and good learn wisdom for the future.” (Plutarch c. 46 – 120 AD)

Only after I'd started fermentation did I learn that the antibacterial qualities of honey can impeded the growth of yeast, and that boiling the honey breaks down the antibacterial properties. If I had followed the recipe, instead of skipping that step, my brew may have fermented more quickly than it did. Due to fermentation not finishing completely the metheglen is probably a little sweeter than it ought to be.

Personally I still find the thyme flavour in the first batch quite distinctive and off putting, but like the sweetness. I find the second batch with the extra sweet-briar much more crisp and refreshing.

If I were to do this again I would start earlier in the year and pick the sweet-briar and other herbs in spring, and ferment over summer. I think I would again choose a simple English honey without distinctive flavours of it's own at it is the herbs in this recipe which give it flavour and interest. I might try a somewhat lower concentration of herbs or try to reach a midpoint between the herbal content of the two batches presented.