THE BRAGGOT — A NEW OLD BREW

IS IT BEER OR IS IT MEAD?

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by SHELLEY STUART

When honey bees captured my interest in the late aughts I quickly ran into the "zucchini problem" Kim Flottum described in "The Backyard Beekeeper": I was harvesting more honey than I could shake a carboy at. My honey was destined for mead and one hive gave me enough honey to brew for a year.

I had three hives.

And then I had five, and not long after — the beekeeper's version of scope creep — I was managing eight colonies. Around colony six I realized that I could make mead just from the cappings wash, leaving me with the foundation for a small honey business. Since I had an ample, continuous supply of mead I started exploring more ways to ferment my honey. This led me to the braggot, a mashup of beer with honey. Or maybe it's a mead with grains? While I was quite happy with the quick-fermenting, beer-based drink that I dubbed a braggot, I needed to know: Did I make true braggot?

Although rare in today's pubs, braggots boast a long history. The earliest written use of "braggot" in English sources dates to 1390 from Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale": "Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth." Braggots (sometimes spelled "bragodi" or "bragawt") appear in Old Welsh texts as early as A.D. 600 and were considered an economically valuable drink. The Welsh could use braggots to pay land taxes, and they had a value between mead (the highest) and ordinary ale (half as valuable).

Another Welsh mention occurs in the 11th-century tale "Mabinogion" where the heroes are tasked to obtain honey "nine times sweeter than the honey of a virgin swarm, without drones and without bees, to make bragget for the feast." Making honey without bees would indeed make this a challenge worthy of a hero,[1] with the resulting celebration demanding some decent libations.

So exactly what is this 1,400-year-old drink? The word "braggot" has an interesting mouthfeel — big and boastful, with a bit of a swagger to it. It matches the braggots I've brewed: a braggot with an interesting mouthfeel that's big and boastful with the promise of an eventual swagger. But pinning a proper definition to the word "braggot" proves a bit tricky.

According to the Beer Judge Certification Program, braggots fall squarely into the Specialty Mead category. "M4A. Braggot. A Braggot is a mead made with malt." Simple and definitive, no? But going old-style and popping into the Oxford English Dictionary for a definition of braggot (spelled "bragget" there) you'll find: "a drink made of honey and ale fermented together." This puts the ale component forward in the description and completely omits any mention of mead. Consulting "The Oxford Companion to Beer" clarifies things like a hazy IPA: A braggot is "a beverage produced from both malt and honey and is in essence a mixed drink, part beer, part mead."

Let's turn then to the recipes. Perhaps by understanding how to brew a braggot, one can pinpoint what this drink should be. In a very simplistic description of mead, the brewer mixes honey, water, nutrients, and yeast, allows it to ferment, lets it age for months (or even years), then drinks.

Equally simplified beermaking steps start with steeping a malted grain mixture in water, boiling the resulting sugar-laden liquid with hops, adding yeast, fermenting, then drinking in as early as three weeks from the first boil.

Extrapolating from that, a meadish braggot would be fermented then aged, with honey as the primary source of sugar. A beerish braggot would be fermented then drunk relatively quickly, presumably with the grains as the primary source of sugar.

Ken Schramm's "The Compleat Meadmaker," a go-to book for new meadmakers, devotes an entire chapter to braggots, making the statement that a braggot is "a mead made from malted barley … in addition to honey." The recipe Schramm gives in this chapter ("Don't Cry for Me Spargentina") mostly fulfills that description. After extracting the grain sugars, he adds enough honey to make it the primary source of alcohol for his braggot. This is a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy, though. If you think a braggot is a mead, then you'll make your mead into a braggot.

Given its long history, we can look to the past for some enlightenment. Several recipes still exist for us to

Photo 1 *A contemporary lineup of honey-containing alcoholic beverages*

trace the roots of braggots, largely from the 14th and 15th centuries. One such book, "Curye on Inglysch," contains this helpful recipe:

> **Ad faciendum brakott.**
> Take xiiii galouns of good fyn ale that the grout therof be twies meischid, & put it into a stonen vessel. & lete it sonde iii daies …

Oof! These old texts are full of archaic, sometimes accidental, spellings. If you would like a gander at the full original (as well as other medieval braggot recipes), see the link at the end of this article. I'll cut to my translation directly:

> **To make a braggot**
> Take 14 gallons of good fine ale that the grain thereof be twice mashed and put it into a stone vessel and let it stand three or four days until it's stale. Afterward take a quart of fine wort, half a quart of life honey[2] and set it over the fire and let it seethe and skim it well until it's clear. Add a pennyworth of powdered pepper and cloves and seethe them well together until it boils. Let it cool and pour it into the foresaid vessel and stop it well with a linen cloth. Add new barm[3] and stop it three or four days before you drink it. Add aqua ardente [distilled liquor].

It's fairly easy to see the ale-forward nature of the braggot, both in the construction of it as well as the honey-to-malt sugar ratios. Give it a little kick with the liquor and I'm fairly certain there will be swagger!

Perusing additional old recipes, you'll find similar treatments: Take several gallons of ale, various amounts of honey, and spices like black or long pepper, cloves, ginger, cinnamon, and galingale (ginger's milder cousin). The ratio of wort sugars to honey universally falls in favor of the wort. Of the two recipes that mention when to drink it, one advises imbibing the braggot after three or four days of fermenting; the other after two weeks. Put together, it's reasonable to say medieval drinkers would have declared braggots a beer.

Before closing the book on "braggot is a beer," though, historically there's an important distinction to braggots. In the medieval contexts, all of the braggot recipes are spiced, with honey added. An ale with honey but no spices was simply called an ale with honey.[4]

After the 1600s, mentions of braggot fade from the culinary literature. As the years progressed, honey became more expensive,[5] replaced by sugar and molasses as the sweeteners of choice. Brewers apparently stopped spicing their beers, in favor of lemon, spruce, and ginger. The drink that had lasted a thousand years simply faded away.

The relatively recent renaissance of beer brewing revived the braggot in the U.S. Since the early 1990s the interest in homebrewing, a 300-fold increase in the number of craft breweries, and the relative success of historically-sourced drinks like Midas Touch created a demand for beers that boast more than just grain and hops. Braggots now make commercial appearances at large- and small-scale breweries[6] as well as ambitious specialists like the Viking Braggot Company. If you compare the number of breweries to the number meaderies that offer braggots, it appears that modern brewers have also decided that a braggot is a beer first, with the honey added.

Honey may be the only connection that today's braggots share with their ancestors. Twenty-first-century drinkers seem to relegate spiced beers to pumpkins and Christmas, preferring instead fruit, barrel-aged, and vanilla flavors year-round, and the commercial braggots mirror that market. But honey is an important connection — and it's the one constant for every definition of "braggot" both now and in the 14th century. Whether you make mead with grains, or beer with honey (or some of each), you expect that the beverage you sip will carry a noticeable influence of the hive to your lips.

My own experience with brewing a braggot bears this out — to some extent. I've spent several months experimenting with one-gallon recipes for an oatmeal stout and a summer wheat, adding a pound of fall honey when I pitch my yeast. (For the record, I joined the "braggot is a beer" team, so I brew my braggots as beers.)

My fall honey comes largely from goldenrod and Japanese knotweed, so has a strong flavor. The resulting braggots finish at about 8% alcohol, with the honey-sweet mouthfeel I expect, however I can't pick out the unique flavors of the fall varietal. It's possible that the aromatics are lost during fermentation or that my palate isn't sensitive enough to pluck them out.

After all this discussion about beer and honey, you may wonder how "honey beers" fit into the picture. It turns out to be a bit muddy. In the name of research, I sampled a handful of honey beers to see how they fared (Photo 1). Some definitely carried the influence of the hive, while for others it was more of a passing glance. Admittedly the sample size was small, but my preliminary recommendation: If you want a beer that boasts about its honey, stick with a braggot.

For a handful of original 14th through 17th century braggot recipes, go to ***HoneyAppleHill.com/Braggot-Recipes****.*

Footnotes

1. **Breeze, A. 2004.** "What was 'Welsh Ale' in Anglo-Saxon England?" in *Neophilogus 88.2* pp. 299-301. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, NL.
2. "[Honey] 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 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 first of a swarm is called Virgin-honey. That of the next year, after the Swarm was hatched, is Life-honey. And ever after, it is Honey of Old-stocks. Honey that is forced out of the Combs, will always taste of Wax."
   Digby, Kenelm. 1669. *The Closet of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Opened* **https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16441/16441-h/16441-h.htm**
3. Barm is the froth on a fermenting beer, which contains active yeast; essentially a yeast starter for your next beer or bread.
4. A gentleman named Sir Thomas Gower made a "pleasant and wholesome drink" by combining seventy gallons of ale and five gallons of honey. After a series of warming, seething and fermenting, you've apparently got a fine drink for Michaelmas and Lent. (Digby)
5. George Washington paid 5 shillings for a gallon of honey but a hogshead (63 gallons) of molasses cost 11 pounds 5 shillings — about 3.5 shillings per gallon. **http://financial.gwpapers.org/?q=advanced-search**
6. Beer Advocate online shares nearly 300 different examples of braggots, ranging from beers with honey to styles with added fruit or spices. Not all labels are currently brewed. (**https://www.beeradvocate.com/beer/styles/114/**)

Shelley Stuart has kept bees in the Finger Lakes, NY, region since 2009. Under the HoneyApple Hill label, she markets honey into DIY kits for budding mead makers and beer brewers. Her experiences range from screenwriting to medieval reenacting, with an occasional volleyball league thrown in for good measure.

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