

FALLENTIMBER MEADERY – A HONEY OF A SWEET DEAL

Apologies to [Fallentimber](#) for the puns but I'm speaking as a convert. I confess to the labels my friends once placed on me... wine snob, cork dork. Mead? Why would I want to drink something made out of honey? Give me a well-aged dry red any day.

Can I keep an open mind?

Fast forward to a beautiful autumn day with an opportunity to prove those misguided mead lovers wrong. I hit the Cowboy Trail (Hwy 22) heading north from Cochrane and turned west just past Cremona, heading into Water Valley. The directions on Fallentimber's website were word perfect and after 14 km, I turned left at the big log inscribed with their name.

I had signed up for the noon tour of the facility and was warmly greeted by one of the family members who run this business. And it is a family affair... parents, sons, cousins, all responsible for the operation's past and current successes.



Then and now

Fifty years ago, Blake Ryan bought this gorgeous quarter section of land in the foothills of southern Alberta as a recreational farm. Blake and his son, Kevin, took up beekeeping as a hobby. Two hundred hives soon grew to 400, all placed strategically along a 55 km stretch of forested foothills from Bottrel to Sundrie, producing honey from clover, alfalfa and wildflowers.

Kevin and his wife, Pattie moved on to the farm in 1981 after they were married and

raised cattle as well as bees. The cattle were phased out when the honey business went commercial. Ryan's Honey is now a household name in markets and stores in southern Alberta. But by the turn of the last century it became apparent they simply couldn't compete with the big apiaries – and by the way, Alberta produces around 45% of Canada's honey, some 17,000 metric tons, annually. The larger ventures have an average of 2,000 hives. It was time to diversify.

No looking back

The family agreed they didn't want to return to the cattle business. Brothers Nathan, Dustin and Colin, third generation Ryans, started experimenting with making mead and soon the potential became obvious. So while their father continued with the beekeeping and Pattie with the bookkeeping, Colin became the mead-master. Nathan took over the job when Colin decided to go into the coffee roasting business, selling his stake in Fallentimber to his cousin, Dan. Their meadery opened its doors to the public in 2010. Traditional mead was sold on site and at many of the local farmers' markets until late 2013. Then began the push to enter the retail markets. The upside? Little competition. The downside – the huge challenge to educate consumers like me.

Looking forward

By this point, I'm in the tasting room with mead-mistress Emily, learning about the different styles of mead. Traditional mead is made up of the basics – fermented honey and water. It ranges from dry to sweet. This is the type of mead that has been consumed for, oh, about 8,000 years. But the real fun begins with their specialty meads, which use same basic ingredients, but are infused with local fruit, (such as Saskatoons from [Solstice Berry Farm](#)) and spices and can be barrel aged. Like any true prairie person, I'm a huge Saskatoon berry fan, but while the Saskatoon mead commanded my attention, the "pymment" is heaven sent. Pymment is a blend of honey and cabernet grapes from Naramata, BC and is full-bodied with a sweet, oaky finish. The conversion has begun.

And now for something completely different...



Not resting on their laurels, the team has come up with what they call Session Meads. These are carbonated – made for a pint glass, not a wine glass and are giving beer brewers a run for their money. And they're packaged in tins, just like beer.

Let me introduce you to Mr. Pink – a "cyser" (mead and cider) combining honey, fresh apple and raspberry. Think pink prosecco but with a lot more going on. Their Hopped Mead is as the name suggests and tastes like a crisp, slightly bitter beer. It was recently awarded gold at the Canadian International Beer Awards. Honey Buck is mead infused with lemon and ginger and can easily be mistaken for a Moscow Mule. But the scene stealer has been Meadjito – the apiarists' version of a Mojito. It's a perfect balance of citrus, honey and mint. And since its inception in 2016, it has been flying off the shelves. In fact, the business is going so well they expanded the operation in 2018, adding three gigantic stainless steel tanks that can hold up to 3,500 kilos of honey, to keep up with demand.

I loaded up on Session samplers and honey and beeswax candles and bid my adieu, no longer a cork dork and happy to spread the word as a convert.

Final words: Learning about bees is a fascination now, but I'm happy to learn at a distance as I am dreadfully allergic to bee stings. It is interesting to note that Pattie (aka Queen Bee) and her son, Nathan are allergic to them as well. But never tell these folks what they can't do.