



Photos by Chris Lawson

Spruce Mountain Meadery in Larkspur is one of 18 participants of the 2004 Castle Rock WineFest.

Where to buy

Spruce Mountain meads are available at the following area stores:

- Spruce Mountain Liquors in Larkspur on Spruce Mountain Road
- Eagle Wines and Spirits in Monument on Baptist Road
- Cork and Bottle Liquors in downtown Monument on Highway 105
- The Wine Seller between Palmer Lake and Monument on Highway 105.

Spruce Mountain Meadery among WineFest participants

By Vicky Gits
Staff Writer

A young couple has turned a passion for mead, an ancient alcoholic beverage, into a trendy and thriving home-based business that is taking over not only the garage but also the basement recreation room of their rural Douglas County home.

Based in Larkspur, Spruce Mountain Meadery is one of 18 Colorado wine-makers that will exhibit their wares at the Castle Rock WineFest July 23-24.

It is one of four meaderies in the state and the only festival beverage maker based in Douglas County.

The mead industry in America has grown to include 60 meaderies, up from about 25 five years ago, said David Myers, president of the Redstone Meadery in Boulder, which is organizing the 2004 International Mead Festival in Boulder Nov. 5-6.

Since Spruce Mountain started selling mead in March 2004 it has concentrated on three varieties:

■ Traditional honey wine (semi-sweet) made from clover honey from Madhava Honey in Lyons.

■ Honey wine with cinnamon and nutmeg.

■ Blackberry honey wine made from pureed Oregon blackberries.

While mead might look and pour like wine, it is not made from grapes. Mead is made from fermented honey and water. Whether mead is technically a kind of wine or something else altogether is subject to debate and depends on one's definition of wine.

"You can make wine from grass clippings," said Jeff Carr, a member of the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board. "Wine is anything that ferments."

"Mead is a wine product made from honey. Mead is sweeter. It has a different flavor profile. It's more herbal like honey, while grape wines are more fruity."

Despite the growing profile of mead, most people still have the wrong idea about the beverage.

"We give them the tour and people invariably ask us, 'Where do you get your grapes from?'" said Harrison Bliss, president of Spruce Mountain Meadery.

Harrison, 37, and Gretchen Bliss, 35, started making mead in 1993 at home as a hobby, inspired by their tasting



experiences while traveling in Europe. After 50 batches they finally made one they liked.

"People loved it cold. It was perfect for a summer picnic," said Gretchen Bliss. "It wasn't that it was cheaper to make ourselves, but it was just funner to do it yourself and to have something nobody else could get."

People tend to think of mead as a dessert wine, but the Spruce Mountain honey wine is more versatile, lighter and somewhat dry.

The flavor and consistency of the product comes from the type of wine yeast used in the mixture, which Harrison Bliss declined to discuss, saying it is a trade secret.

Today the goal is to increase aware-

ness of honey wine and market the mead to the wine crowd as a "new twist" on the familiar grape-based libation. Mead also appeals to people who are allergic to sulfites and tannins.

The Blisses make mead in a 265-gallon steel container they bought used for \$4,000 and had shipped to their home this year. The honey-water combination is heated in a small kettle to at least 160 degrees for 20 minutes to be pasteurized, then is cooled and put in the tank. Next the yeast is added to the tank and the liquid allowed to ferment for a month and a half to two months. The yeast is removed and the brew is aged in the tank for about five months before bottling.

Both Gretchen and Harrison Bliss are involved in the business on a part-time

basis, when they aren't working their regular jobs. Gretchen, a Russian linguist who works in Colorado Springs with the defense industry, handles sales and marketing, while Harrison, a telecom consultant who works around the country, takes care of administration and operations.

Eventually there could be a tasting room and official tours. The Blisses have plans to produce a dozen meads, including a champagne-style mead.

In the meantime, private samplings are by appointment in the garage, with customers seated at a folding table surrounded by cardboard boxes, cases of mead, plastic drums, usual miscellaneous household goods and a chrome tank as big as a large refrigerator. The open garage door frames a view of a mountain

meadow, pine trees and a hummingbird feeder.

The product comes in a wine-style, cobalt blue bottle, with a label featuring a romantic, quasi-medieval castle, mountain scenery and sunset. Prices range from \$12 to \$15 per bottle.

Initial consumer reaction has been enthusiastic beyond the couple's expectations. Gretchen started by approaching the local liquor stores and sold 22 cases in two days.

At the Manitou Springs Wine Festival in May, they sold \$1,500 of wine in five hours.

The Blisses have ordered four more tanks, which will allow them to expand to capacity of about 16,000 bottles per year.

Participants

Modern vineyards now feature the classic European wine grape varieties, and once again the art of winemaking is thriving in Colorado. Most of these wineries are small, family-owned estates that have earned a well-deserved reputation for creating a wide variety of premium wines.

From deep Merlots and expressive Chardonnays to elegant Rieslings and Cabernets, Colorado wines consistently win top national and international awards.

Following are the Colorado wineries that are part of the 2004 Castle Rock WineFest.

- Spero Winery — Denver
- Redstone Meadery — Boulder
www.redstonemeadery.com
- Stoney Mesa Cellars — Cedaredge
www.stoneymesa.com
- DeBeque Canyon Winery — Palisade
- Garfield Estates Vineyard & Winery — Palisade
www.garfieldestates.com
- Mountain View Winery — Olathe
www.mountainviewwinery.com
- Amber Ridge Vineyards — Palisade
www.amberridgevineyards.com
- Colorado Cellars — Palisade
- Two Rivers Winery — Grand Junction
www.tworiverswinery.com
- Augustina's Winery — Boulder
- Book Cliff Vineyards — Boulder
www.bookcliffvineyards.com
- Plum Creek Cellars — Palisade
- Balisteri Vineyards — Denver
- The Abbey at Holy Cross Vineyard — Cañon City
www.abbeywinery.com
- Spruce Mountain Meadery — Larkspur
www.abbeywinery.com
- Pikes Peak Vineyard — Colorado Springs
- Old Town Winery — Arvada
- Cottonwood Cellars — Olathe
www.cottonwoodcellars.com

For a list of 50 of Colorado's top wineries, visit www.coloradowine.com/wineries/wineriesList.cfm

Larkspur couple uses passion to build business