

Basic Cordial Making



Brian Crawford

Background

The term “cordial” refers to a wide variety of beverages, not all of them alcoholic. The term “liqueur” refers to an alcoholic cordial, though the two terms are often used interchangeably. The modern, legal, definition of a cordial or liqueur is an alcoholic beverage with a sugar content of 2.5% or higher (in most states).

While it is unclear who was the first to prepare cordials, it is clear that they were being produced in Italy as early as the 13th century and were being produced throughout Europe by the 16th century. Many of these developed out of herbal medicines being produced at the time. Benedictine and Chartreuse are modern descendants of herbal medicines that are still available commercially today.

There are three typical techniques that would have been used in period to produce cordials. The first of these is distillation of a brewed product. This technique results in a product akin to brandy which is fundamentally distilled wine. The second technique involved infusing flavors into wine or mead and then distilling the product. This was most commonly used to produce fruit flavored cordials. The third technique was to infuse flavors into distilled spirits. This was more commonly used for spice cordials.

The third technique, being the simplest, is the most common one in use today and will be the technique discussed here.

Basic Rules for all Brewers

1. Keep everything clean and sanitized.

Contaminants can change the flavor of your product, and in the case of beer, wine, and mead, compete with your yeast, potentially stopping fermentation.

2. Be patient.

Brewing is a slow process. It can take from 10 days for the quickest cordials to over 10 years for some meads for the product to reach a desirable flavor.

3. Write everything down.

Take careful notes of all ingredients, steps in preparation, length of ageing etc. This way you can correct any problems that occur and get a more consistent flavor from batch to batch.

4. Brew what you like.

This way there will always be somebody to drink your products.

Equipment

Cordial making requires relatively little in the way of equipment. At the most basic level you will need the following:

- One liter or larger wide-mouth jar with tight fitting lid.
- Course sieve or colander
- Muslin or cheese cloth for straining
- Racking cane (or 3 to 4 feet of aquarium tubing)
- Storage bottles with tight fitting lids (mason jars work well)
- Decorative bottles for presentation or competition

Ingredients

Alcohol Base

Most period recipes call for "Aquevity" or the "water of life." While recipes vary aquevity is usually a distilled grain spirit. Grain alcohol is the closest modern equivalent, and is a good choice because it adds virtually no flavors that compete with the other ingredients. However grain alcohol is not always readily available. Vodka is a good substitute as it also has relatively little flavor.

Other spirits such as brandy, whiskey, and rum can also be used. These of course add their own flavors and are therefore less widely used. Of these three, brandy is the most period.

Sugars and Sweeteners

Recipes calling for sugar have been dated back to 1425, and refined sugar first appeared in the Middle East around 1430, so table sugar is an acceptable sweetener for use in most cordials. Other sweeteners such as brown sugar and honey can also be used, however these will impart their own flavors. Artificial sweeteners are not recommended. Sugar does not readily dissolve in alcohol; it is often advisable to make a simple syrup of two parts sugar, one part water, heating until dissolved into a clear liquid.

Water

Tap water is usually acceptable, unless your water has a relatively high mineral content. If you don't like the taste of your tap water you may wish to filter it or substitute bottled water.

Flavoring Agents

Virtually any fruit, nut, herb, or spice can be used to flavor cordials. Period fruits include apple, currants, date, fig, gooseberry, grape, lemon, medlar, mulberry, orange, pear, plum, pomegranate, quince, raspberry, sloe, strawberry, and sweetbrier hips, as well as dried versions of these. When using fruit, it is best to crush or finely chop the fruit to

increase the amount of flavor that will be absorbed, however since crushed fruit tends to clump you will need to stir this frequently. Make sure the fruit is fresh, ripe, and free from blemishes. The majority of modern spices, with a few exceptions, had reached Europe via the silk road by the end of the 15th century, though most remained rare and expensive commodities. When using spices, fresh, whole spices are more flavorful than ground spices. Usually you will want to "bruise" spices or herbs so that the outer surface is broken open to release flavors. If using nuts, you can either simply chop them or they can be roasted in a moderate oven for a few minutes before use.

Process

The process of making cordials consists of five steps.

1. Prepare the fruit and flavoring agents.

Clean and chop or mash fruit, grind or bruise the spices, and prepare sugar as simple syrup. Make sure to allow the simple syrup to cool. Place all of these in the wide mouthed jar.

2. Add the alcohol base.

Add the alcohol base to the other ingredients, making sure they are completely covered. Stir well to ensure all ingredients are well mixed.

3. Allow to Steep.

Place the bottle out of direct sunlight and in a place where the temperature will remain relatively stable. Allow to sit until the flavors have completely infused. The length of time this takes will vary. Taste the cordial at several points to assess the flavor.

4. Strain into bottles.

Use a colander or sieve to remove the fruit and other solids from the liquid. Allow to settle and then either filter or rack to remove the remaining sediment. You may have to do this several times to remove all of the sediment. Once the cordial is relatively free of sediment, place into bottles with tight fitting lids.

5. Age.

Place the bottles out of direct sunlight and allow to age. The amount of time required for the cordial to mellow will vary depending on the recipe. As with steeping, taste the cordial at several points to assess the flavor.

Recipes

Lord Verney's Vsquebath (1550-1625)

From A Sip Through Time

Ingredients:

1 Liter of vodka
1 lb. raisins
10 figs
6 dates
2 ounces cinnamon sticks
6 sticks licorice root (approximately 1 once)

Method:

Slice the figs and dates into medium sized slices and remove the date pits. "Bruise" the cinnamon sticks by placing them in a plastic bag and rubbing vigorously so that the sticks scrape against one another and rub off small amounts of cinnamon powder. Split the licorice root into quarters to expose the inner surface. Add raisins, figs, dates, cinnamon sticks, licorice root, and vodka to a large container with a tight fitting lid. Mix well. Let stand for ten days, stirring the mixture two to three times per day. Rack twice to remove the sediment and bottle.

Hazelnut Liqueur

From Cordials from Your Kitchen

Ingredients:

½ pound hazelnuts
1 cup vodka
½ cup brandy
½ cup white sugar
½ cup light brown sugar
1 ¼ cups water
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1 teaspoon glycerin (optional)
Caramel coloring

Coarsely chop hazelnuts in food processor. Transfer to clean 1-quart container and add vodka and brandy. Cover and store in a cool dark place for six weeks.

Use coarse sieve or colander to strain out solids. Discard. Strain again with a fine-mesh strainer. Transfer liqueur to clean container, cover, and let stand for two days. Rack or filter into a clean container.

Make a simple syrup by bringing sugar, brown sugar, and water to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly to prevent scorching. Remove from heat and let stand until just warm. Add syrup, vanilla, and glycerin (if using) to racked liqueur. Add caramel coloring one drop at a time, stirring after each addition, until desired color is achieved. May be served immediately but is better if allowed to age for one to two months in a covered container.

Apple and Spice Cordial

½ Liter Christian Brothers Frost White Brandy
1 ½ Pounds Gala Apples
2 Whole Cloves
¼ Teaspoon Ground Cinnamon
¼ Teaspoon Ground Nutmeg
¾ Cup Granulated Sugar
½ Cup Water

Dice apples into ½ inch cubes. Add brandy, apples, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg to 2 liter container with tight fitting lid. Combine sugar and water and boil for five minutes to produce a simple syrup. Add syrup to other ingredients. Mix well. Let stand for six weeks. Rack or filter to remove sediment. Can be served immediately but is better when allowed to age one to two months.

Resources:

Atlantian Brewers Home Page:

<http://moas.atlantia.sca.org/wsnlinks/index.php?action=displaycat&catid=259&submit=Go>

Basic Brewing Instructions:

http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/recipes/basic_brewing.html

Cordial Documentation

<http://web.raex.com/~obsidian/IGGcord.html>

Period Recipes

A Sip Through Time by Cindy Renfrow. ISBN: 0-9628598-3-4

Modern Recipes

Cordials from Your Kitchen by Pattie Vargas and Rich Gulling.
ISBN: 0-88266-986-9