

Meet mead

Winooski couple opens mead brewery in Colchester

By Jason Starr

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Meet mead — a storied alcoholic beverage fermented from honey.

Meet Groennfell Meadery — a new Colchester mead-making operation that launched its first label, Mannaz Mead, this month.

And meet Ricky and Kelly Klein — a married couple from Delaware who graduated from Middlebury College and opened Groennfell this year in a small warehouse near Costco.

The Kleins enter a wide open market with hopes that mead — and their dry, crisp brand of it — will follow the path to popularity beaten by Vermont’s craft beer breweries and hard cideries. Groennfell plans to sell bottled four-packs for \$10 at a variety of grocery and convenience stores throughout the state. They have kicked things off with bottle sales at The Mule Bar in Winooski and at One Federal Restaurant in St. Albans. They also offer tastings at their 856 Hercules Drive location. St. Michael’s College students who can walk through the woods to Hercules Drive have comprised their primary walk-up traffic so far, the couple said.

“We want to be everywhere. Anywhere you can buy cider, we want to have our product,” Ricky said.

Never tried (or heard of) mead? The Kleins have honed their quick pitch to potential customers new to the beverage. The story starts with honey, which is heated to 105 degrees, mixed with water, cooled, fermented with yeast, aged and carbonated. The story includes mead’s history as the alcoholic beverage of choice of the ancient Celtic, Gaelic and Nordic cultures.

The Kleins also have a message for the already-initiated. You may have tried what some call “honey-wine” and considered it too sweet for your palette. Groennfell Meadery concocts a unique style that de-emphasizes the sweetness, despite the honey foundation.

“We go for dry and drinkable,” Ricky said. “It’s easier when someone says ‘I’ve never heard of it.’ We can start from scratch.”

The Mannaz label contains 5 percent alcohol. Groennfell is also putting out a cranberry-infused mead this year and plans two other varieties for 2014.

The Kleins' love of the beverage and its lack of availability fueled the idea for Groennfell Meadery. There is only other commercial mead-maker in Vermont.

"You can buy all kinds of awesome beer in Vermont, but we could never find mead on the shelves. We thought, 'we make it. We love it. Let's make it available and affordable for people,'" Ricky said.

"There is a huge potential for growth," Kelly added. "In Vermont we've seen huge growth in the cider industry, so the industry just seems like it's ready for this. We'll see."

Ricky started brewing beer while in college and discovered Mead while studying abroad in Denmark. After graduating Middlebury, he worked in Iowa for a home beer brewer and began honing mead concoctions. The Kleins were looking for an entrepreneurial endeavor and mead-making became the obvious choice. They returned to Vermont with a move to Winooski in April after landing their business location just over the town line in Colchester.

"We came to this business model and it fit everything we wanted and every skill we have," Kelly said. "We both can do almost everything, and if there's something one of us is lacking, the other one has it.

"Plus, we love our product and that really helps."

Their Hercules Drive space functions as a brewery with three 1,000-gallon tanks, a bottling operation and a packaging center. It's also the headquarters of an active blog and website at www.groennfell.com, the sales/marketing center of the business and a place to offer factory sales and samples.

The company has played up mead's ancient traditions in its branding with a Gaelic- infused font and logo, and a Nordic-derived name. Groennfell means Green Mountains in old Nordic, Ricky says.

"We wanted to be a Vermont business," he said. "Vermont is so friendly to small businesses and to breweries, we just thought it was the perfect fit."

There is room to grow in the Colchester location, and with its proximity to Interstate 89 as well the company's honey source in Canada, Hercules Drive is Groennfell's home for now and the foreseeable future.