

DECANTED by Summer Block

extreme conditions

chilling out with Canadian ice wines



This chilly time of year is the perfect time to discover the unique taste of ice wine, one of Canada's chief contributions to the international wine scene.

To make ice wine, grapes are left on the vine long into winter. The harvest begins once temperatures have dipped below around -10°C (14°F). Once the water inside the grapes freezes, the frozen grapes are then pressed to extrude a small quantity of extremely sweet, concentrated juice.

However, choosing the harvest time is tricky since grapes that are left to thaw and then refreeze may be ruined. Because of the high juice concentration, ice wine grapes are extremely low yield, producing about one-fifth the output of non-frozen grapes. What's more, because the grapes stay longer on the vine, they also are prey to accident and injury, including scavenging by birds and other animals. Not surprisingly then, this high-risk, low-yield production method makes ice wine quite expensive.

Ice wines were first produced in Germany – out of necessity – in order to squeeze the last drops out of frozen stock. Producers were pleasantly surprised by the resulting wine's sweet, intense taste with a clean, acidic finish that keeps this dessert wine from being too sticky.

Today, Canada is the leading producer of ice wines, especially in the Ontario region, though it is a fairly new trend – commercial production began only in the late 1970s. According to Wines of Canada (www.winesofcanada.com),

"Sales in vintages alone rose from 25,000 bottles in 1992-93 to an estimated 120,000 bottles in 1996-97, though sales continue to grow at a rate of over 50 per cent per annum."

However, this intriguing method of producing wine is not without controversy. Traditionally ice wine grapes are harvested very early in the morning or at night in sub-freezing temperatures by workers using their bare fingers. The wines are then brought to unheated cellars to begin the fermentation process. Some have protested these harsh working conditions, though the ice wine industry has countered by saying that the harvesters earn a higher wage than those who work in more conventional climates, and that appropriate precautions are taken.

Ice wines have proven popular in Asia, notably in Japan, though China is quickly catching up. More than 60 per cent of Canadian ice wine is exported to Asia, where it is often sold for top dollar. In December the Chinese wine producer Changyu announced they had formed a partnership with Canadian producer Aolos to set up a 5,000-acre wine estate in Liaoning Province. Unfortunately, these entrepreneurs will have to compete with pirated ice wine, a significant problem in the Chinese ice wine industry. The latter, a low quality product, is produced in China but bears false Canadian labels. These pirated bottles not only threaten Canadian market share, but the poor taste damages the image of ice wine, in an industry that is already at high risk.

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