

# going to extremes

HARSH WINTERS MAKE AN ELEGANT WINE | BY ERICA DUECY



➤ THE TEMPERATURE OUTSIDE IS 16 degrees F and dropping steadily. It's New Year's Eve, but instead of celebrating, Inniskillin winemaker Bruce Nicholson is pacing between a computer and a television, diligently checking and rechecking weather models. Finally, as midnight nears, he makes the call. As fireworks burst over Lake Ontario in the distance, the winery's viticultural managers and their crews make their way along icy roads to the vineyard. At 3:30 a.m., when the temperature hits 14 degrees F, they spring into action, harvesting some 10 tons of cabernet franc grapes before daybreak.

Welcome to the world of extreme wine-making, where brutal temperatures and hearty grapes come together to produce icewine, Canada's own liquid gold. Icewine occupies a niche in the sweet wines category alongside late-harvest wines and those made from grapes affected by noble rot (like France's sauternes and Germany's trockenbeerenauslesen), but at a lower price: Half-bottles (375 ml) of Canadian icewine start at about \$50; European sweet wines can command several times that amount.

Stylistically, what makes icewine different are its luscious fruit flavors and crisp acidity. Where many sweet wines are dominated by honey notes on the nose and palate, leaving a sweet finish, icewine has concentrated fruit flavors and a liveliness



Timing is everything: These cabernet franc grapes, frozen on the vine, must be harvested at precisely the right time to yield the highly concentrated juice essential to making fine icewine.

that leaves the palate dry. Flavors range by varietal: Vidal reveals peach and apricot scents; riesling yields citrus and golden fruits; and cabernet franc recalls strawberries and cream.

“The impact of icewine, aromatically, is that it’s so intense,” says Paul Bosc Jr., vintner at Château des Charmes winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. “When you smell it, it explodes out of the glass with concentrated fruit. And it has such complexity on the palate, with acidity that makes your tongue tingle.”

This yin-yang of fruit and acid makes icewine surprisingly food-friendly. At The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, Colorado, wine director Tim Baldwin often pairs icewine with foie gras and paté, as well as desserts and cheese plates. “As people have been exposed to it, through wine pairings and tasting menus, they’ve come to appreciate it more,” he observes. As evidence, he points to the resort’s icewine sales, which have nearly doubled during the past three years.

Drinking icewine in the winter is *de rigueur* at the Fairmont Hotel at Quebec’s Mont Tremblant. “When you go to Provence, you drink rosé out on the terrace,” says Stephane Côté, the hotel’s sommelier

and director of conference and catering. “When you ski in Canada, you drink icewine by the fireplace. It’s part of the experience.”

Though the Great White North is better known for its ski resorts than its wineries, Canada’s great ski conditions — below freezing, but not too frigid, and remarkably consistent — are perfect for icewine production. “If it’s too cold, you can’t extract anything from the grapes,” says Magdalena Kaiser-Smit, a representative for the Wine Council of Ontario, the region’s trade association. “And similarly, if it’s too cold, you don’t want to be skiing.”

Germany is the grandfather of icewine — *eiswein* in German — and is still the world’s top producer, but its more variable winter weather means that vintage consistency can be problematic, and a yearly harvest isn’t guaranteed in all regions. A similar scenario plays out with icewine production in neighboring Austria and Switzerland.

Even within Canada, some areas are riskier than others. About 75 percent of the country’s icewine is made in Ontario, the province with the most consistent growing conditions; southern Quebec and the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia make up the difference when the weather cooperates. Inniskillin, Canada’s largest icewine maker, maintains wineries in both Ontario and British Columbia, producing approximately 45,000 cases each year. But even a thousand fewer cases could result in hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost revenue. Nicholson recalls narrowly avoiding financial disaster one unseasonably warm winter when he was working at Inniskillin’s winery in the Okanagan Valley. “In 2002, I was harvesting out there in late February, and was literally within a day of calling off the entire harvest,” he says. “Some wineries did.”

Icewine producers are challenged by more than temperature fluctuations. “The fruit left on the vine after the normal autumn harvest is vulnerable to rot, ravaging winds, hail, hungry birds, and animals,” says Paul Lizak, president of Legends Estates Winery.

Once the frozen grapes are picked, they must be pressed quickly before melting ice dilutes the juice. When properly pressed, the juice yield is extremely low, with each frozen grape releasing just a drop of concentrated liquid. By comparison, the same volume of grapes that goes into one half-bottle of icewine could be used to make six full-size bottles of regular table wine. It is the perfect storm of these factors — challenging harvest conditions, labor-intensive process, small volumes — that results in icewine’s premium price.

Fortunately, a little icewine goes a long way. With 1½-ounce pours as the standard, a half-bottle can serve up to eight. Even at \$80 a bottle, that’s not bad for a show-stopping end to a dinner party.\* The only risky business is that it might upstage dessert. ●

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