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### She's hot on the trail of the elusive 'Minus 8'

"After Minus 8 received rave notices in some magazines, folks actually drove by her house and knocked on neighbors' doors."

11/30/2005

By JANICE OKUN



If life hands you lemons, make lemonade; if life gives you frozen grapes, make vinegar.

And not just any vinegar, either. This is a story about one made from ice wine, called Minus 8. Named after the Celsius temperature at which grapes must be (painfully) picked to produce ice wine, the vinegar is available in minute quantities on line and at some gourmet shops. It's just about as hard to find as the X-Box right now and at about \$50 for a 200 ml bottle, almost as expensive.

In a way, Minus 8 represented a learning experience because it's a quintessential example of the ever growing esoterica of food - like the salt that comes from specific geographical areas; like the coffee that comes from a single estate. If you are in the cynical business that I'm in, you cannot help but wonder if expense is worth it.

Well, maybe, sometimes it is. Read my odyssey that follows. Since Minus 8 is produced right across the border near St. Catharines, I couldn't wait to try it and talk to the producers, too. It took me a year to catch up with them.

Maybe this was simply a case of reverse hype - but the hard-to-get routine really worked, and I was hooked. I had to make a serious effort to find them.

First names only please - I cannot reveal my sources. I finally caught up with Rachel - she lives on a farm that grows high-quality grapes and sells them to wine producers in the area. The vinegar is strictly a hobby.

Rachel wants to preserve her privacy. After Minus 8 received rave notices in some magazines, folks actually drove by her house and knocked on neighbors' doors. Not in a harmful way, and she is tolerant. "They are foodies," she says gently.

But here's the point - she and her husband are foodies, too. They've been making Minus 8



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for four years or so, about 400 cases a year, and mostly selling it to uber-restaurants like Charlie Trotter's. Only the faintest trickle goes to retail.

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"We figured that we could make something better than the balsamic vinegars people pay \$30 a bottle for," Rachel says. And it's quite a process. After the wine is made from those shriveled grapes, bacteria (called "mother") is introduced.

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"That's the tricky part," Rachel says. "My husband knows his microbes. It's actually easier to make wine than vinegar."

But that's only half way there. The stuff is aged in French oak barrels and, like the real balsamic vinegar or sherry works down into ever smaller barrels through the years. Final results taste wonderful over salads, I was told, and over fruit and - you sure don't need much of it.

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A recipe for ribeye steaks that appears on the Web site [www.minus8vinegar.com](http://www.minus8vinegar.com)) actually calls for "three drops of Minus 8." Since I didn't have an eye dropper I took the stuff straight. (It is recommended as a digestive.)

Standing in my kitchen at 6 in the morning, I peeled off the wax on my sample, a hand-numbered bottle - I felt like a character in the "Cask of Amontillado," for goodness sake. Then I poured out a quarter teaspoon and sipped it.

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I could taste the sweetness of ice wine, the pungency of vinegar but there was a lot of other stuff working, too. The complexity of flavors was enormous.

So here's the bottom line: There are special foods and then there are very special foods. Do you need Minus 8 in your pantry? No. Real balsamic vinegar (not the caramel colored cheapie) and good sherry vinegar can fill in nicely.

But still, Minus 8 is unique and there is a moral here for all of us: Complicated and expensive food can be more than OK.

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