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Frozen Vines (and Fingers) Yield a Sweet Reward

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Beamsville, Ontario

IT is 14 degrees above zero as a group of wine lovers converges in a vineyard on the Niagara Peninsula. Frosty bundles of Riesling grapes hang on rows of vines in the pale, gathering daylight. A storm the night before has left behind six inches of fresh snow.

Perfect conditions, the winemaker Shiraz Mottiar declares, for picking the frozen grapes that he will soon transform into Canada's specialty, ice wine, for his employer, Malivoire Wine Company. By law, Canadian ice-wine makers cannot call their product by that name unless it is made from grapes picked off the vine at or below -8 Celsius (17.6 degrees Fahrenheit). So far, so good. Mr. Mottiar is confident that the temperature will hold, at least for a few hours, and instructs the group to get to work. What is ideal for the harvest, though, is not so great for human extremities.

"My feet are very cold now," said Peter Scott, who woke up at 4:45 a.m. to make the hour-and-10-minute drive from Toronto with his wife, Jessica Dolman. This is the fourth year of picking for the couple, who, like the other 25 or so loyal Malivoire customers bending intently over their work, are not paid for their labor. They will, however, receive a free bottle of ice wine with their names listed among the workers on the 2010 vintage label. After the harvest they'll also be invited back inside the winery, where the proprietor, Martin Malivoire, has been preparing vats of hot chocolate and chili spiked with ice wine.

"The whole experience is very addictive," Ms. Dolman said.

Among devotees in North America, this stretch of flat farmland bordered by Lake Ontario to the north and Lake Erie to the south is ground zero for indulging a taste for ice wine, a sweet wine that is often paired with dessert, rich cheeses and foie gras. Canada vies with Germany for the title of world's largest producer of ice wine — some years, because of inconsistent weather, Germany's crop is small or nonexistent. (Austria, Switzerland and New York's Finger Lakes are among the many areas that also make ice wine.)

More than 75 percent of all the ice wine in Canada comes from Ontario. (The remainder is made in regions like southern Quebec and the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia.) Unlike more temperate parts of the world, Canada has consistently cold winters, which guarantee an annual crop of frozen grapes. Still, ice wine represents just a small percentage of wine being produced here. It's expensive to make: a ton of grapes yields only one-sixth the amount of ice wine as table wine — hence its nickname, liquid gold — and its prices start at $50 for a half-bottle. Leaving grapes on the vine long past normal fall harvest also is risky.

"There are all kinds of hazards," said Norman D. Beal, a former oil trader who in 2000 turned a decrepit

barn into an opulent tasting room at his Peninsula Ridge Estates Winery on a hill in Beamsville. “There are the birds, mildew, all kinds of diseases.” That’s in addition to the vagaries of the weather, including rain, hail, ice storms and midwinter thaws.

Extreme wine making, as some call ice-wine production, calls for extreme wine touring. In winter that means lots of layers, and maybe a face mask with an opening big enough for sipping. The trade-offs: there’s plenty of room to belly up to the tasting bars, and it’s easier to get a table at one of the region’s many fine restaurants.

Each tasting inevitably leads to a game of identifying classic ice-wine flavors: lychee nut, caramel, toffee, strawberry jam, crème brûlée, burnt orange, citrus, tropical fruit. Then what follows is a discussion of the improbable alchemy that goes into producing a drink that is said to have been created by mistake in a German vineyard in 1794.

Ice-wine makers here like to leave the grapes on the vine through a series of mild freezes and thaws instead of picking at the first opportunity. That process produces the right balance of sweetness, acidity and the nuanced flavors that separate great ice wine from something that is cloyingly sweet.

“You’re always watching the sugar and acid levels,” Mr. Mottiar said. “Once they peak, then you pick and press.” The ice-wine harvest usually doesn’t occur until well into December, and in some years it has stretched into February.

When the frozen grapes are pressed at just the right temperature, usually immediately after picking, the water is crystallized, and the juice that remains consists of the most exquisitely concentrated sugars and flavors.

“It’s like squeezing marbles,” said Juan Miranda, the assistant wine maker at Peninsula Ridge. (Some wineries have broken their presses when trying to extract the juice from grapes at too low a temperature.) Most ice wine is aged about a year before it is bottled, though it can be aged much longer.

A key to this area’s success in creating some of the world’s best ice wine is its geography. Because Lake Ontario is so deep, the heat that it stores up during the summer months is released over the land as air begins to cool in the fall. During the winter, the constant flow of warm air moderates temperatures in the fields. The Niagara Escarpment, a ridge running through the peninsula close to the lake, plays a similar role. Winds coming off the lake hit the ridge, known here as the Beamsville Bench, then recirculate over the land, acting as natural antifreeze for the vines. Otherwise, typical Canadian winter temperatures of -20 Celsius (-4 degrees Fahrenheit) or below could easily destroy the crops.

Like the wineries in the Finger Lakes, the 65 wineries operating in Niagara-on-the-Lake and farther west in the Niagara Escarpment have had to overcome a reputation for the sickeningly sweet wines made in the days when all that grew there were native labrusca grapes. Those grape vines were mostly replaced by European vinifera vines in the 1970s.

The Finger Lakes have adjusted to their fickle winters by making more sweet, late-harvest wines that don’t require grapes to be frozen on the vine. They also produce “iced wines,” which are made with grapes picked in the fall, then frozen later under artificial conditions. But Canadians tend to dismiss these wines as

inferior. “We’re one of the rare regions in the world that has the right soil and cold enough winters for the grapes to freeze,” said Ben Nicks, a sales associate for Stratus Vineyards in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Canadian wine makers also argue that their strict rules regulating ice wine — inspectors check each winery’s harvest to measure sugar levels and ensure that grapes were picked at the proper temperature — have given them an advantage over other areas.

“We have the ice-wine cops,” said Joseph DeMaria, president of Royal DeMaria in Beamsville, which says that it is the only winery in the world that exclusively makes ice wine. Mr. DeMaria, a Toronto hairdresser who started making ice wine in 1998 with no background in the industry, has earned close to 300 awards for his small winery.

To visit the original makers of ice wine on the peninsula, you must head 25 miles east of the Beamsville Bench to Niagara-on-the-Lake, a quaint tourist town surrounded by vineyards. Just outside the downtown along the Niagara River are Inniskillin Wines and Reif Estate Winery, which were the first to perfect and sell ice wine on the Niagara Peninsula in 1984.

Inniskillin, Canada’s largest maker of ice wines, has seen a big jump in visitors during the cold months. About 40 percent of the 250,000 people who visit the winery each year arrive between November and March, said Deborah Pratt, a spokeswoman for Inniskillin, up from 15 percent a decade ago. Inniskillin has also been a pioneer in making sparkling ice wine.

Every January, as part of Niagara-on-the-Lake’s ice-wine festival, Inniskillin puts up a giant tent and offers an ice-wine tasting at a bar created from — what else? — ice. Ms. Pratt says ice-wine makers are working to convince people that it is not just a drink for special occasions. “Our challenge is to get people to take out that bottle they have sitting in the cupboard, open it up and experiment,” Ms. Pratt said.

Just down the road is Reif Estate Winery, whose president and chief executive, Klaus W. Reif, took over his uncle’s winery here in 1987 after studying wine making in his native Germany. Wine making is in his blood — his German ancestors tended vineyards beginning in 1638 — but ice wine has been in his heart since he took his first sip 23 years ago.

“There is so much effort and time that goes into it,” he said as he stood in a room full of oak barrels that his grandfather once used to store wine. “The first time I had ice wine, I drank the whole bottle by myself. It took me three or four hours. It was so beautiful.”

Correction*: An earlier version of a photo caption on this article misspelled the name of the town where volunteers were picking grapes. As correctly noted elsewhere in the article, it is Beamsville, not Bearnsville.*