

# Made Like Ice Wine, Canadian Vinegar is Chefs' Sweet Secret

**Mystery-shrouded condiment appears on top restaurant menus.**

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What started out as a hobby for two Ontario foodies has become an ingredient much coveted, and consequently, guarded by some of the nation's preeminent chefs.

Minus 8 vinegar, named for the temperature at which the grapes are picked to produce its base wine, shares company with sweet wine vinegars, though those who use Minus 8 say it has much more depth and complexity than its balsamic and Sherry-based cousins.

The problem with Minus 8 is -- although it tastes great -- you can't have any, unless you eat at some of the country's best restaurants.

Everything about Minus 8 is clandestine. The vinegar is produced in Ontario's Niagara region (the exact location is a secret) by a couple who wish to remain anonymous (we'll call them "Rick" and "Karen"). Rick owns a 100-acre vineyard planted to eight red and white grape varieties, though the exact varieties are also a secret. He produces the vinegar in much the same way ice wine is made: Frozen grapes are harvested by hand in the winter when temperatures dip down below -8 degrees C, then are immediately pressed to extract the sweet, concentrated juice.

Rick then makes wines from the juice and blends the wines to create a base for the vinegar. He ferments and ages the vinegar in French oak barrels in a system similar to the soleras used to produce Sherry. Each vintage is aged separately and blended with other vintages (their first was 1997) to make the final product, a sweet, reddish-brown liquid of which they package about 300 cases of 200ml bottles each year.

Although some chefs label it as such on their menus, the couple is careful not to call their creation "ice wine" vinegar, because it doesn't follow the Canadian Vintners Quality Alliance's stringent guidelines for using the trademarked ice wine name. Among other deviations, Minus 8 is made by blending white and red grapes, while Canadian ice wine is made using only white grapes, usually Riesling and Vidal, or only red, primarily Cabernet Franc.

What's the cause for all the hush-hush? "It's supposed to just be a hobby for us," Karen said. "And we produce such a small amount that the demand gets overwhelming. People have called our home, called our parents' homes, even dropped by the house asking for the stuff. It's crazy how far they'll go to try to get a bottle."

Their "hobby" quickly turned into the Faberge egg of vinegars when Karen urged Rick to begin selling Minus 8 to restaurants. With just a few bottles, the couple visited New York in 2002 to peddle their product to a few of the country's top toques. Their first stop was Jean Georges, a *Wine Spectator* Best of Award of Excellence winner. Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten loved it and began serving it with venison.

Two years later, an impressive lineup of the country's best restaurants -- including several *Wine Spectator* Grand Award winners -- are using Minus 8, in preparations that span the menu from appetizer to dessert.

David Daniels, chef at The Federalist in Boston, was particularly careful with his new secret ingredient: "As soon as I tasted it, I had to have it. And I didn't tell a soul. When a great product comes along, you want to keep it for yourself as long as you can." Daniels uses Minus 8 with meats, such as venison with a lingonberry-Minus 8 glaze. "There are a lot of vinegars out there, but this one tasted really different to me," he said. "It has a nice balance of acidity and sweetness that you can use in savory dishes."

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At Aureole in Las Vegas, chef Philippe Rispoli likes the vinegar's versatility. "I serve it with foie gras. I serve it with vegetables. I deglaze with it and use it for sauces," he said.

The couple recently began selling a small amount of verjus, the unfermented juice of recently harvested grapes, which makes a less acidic and often more wine-friendly alternative to vinegar. Called 8 Brix, it comes in two varieties, red and white. Pierre Schaedelin, chef at New York's Le Cirque 2000, reduces the white verjus with shallots and cream and serves it with oysters. "It's definitely one of my favorite products," he said.

Despite the popularity of Minus 8, Rick and Karen don't plan on becoming full-time vinegar producers. "Three hundred cases of vinegar will never pay the bills," Karen said. "But it's something fun that lets us travel and eat in our favorite restaurants."

Minus 8 isn't available at any retailers, but questions about the vinegar will be fielded at [minus8vinegar@hotmail.com](mailto:minus8vinegar@hotmail.com).

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