

Celebrating Extreme Wines:



NIAGARA
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Views



24
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Niagara-on-the-Lake's Icewine Festival

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photos by Mike Davis

Every winter Niagara-on-the-Lake clears its main street to let tents, bar tables and ice sculptures take over for an icewine festival. Other towns have their own events as part of a Region-wide celebration of Canada's most famous wine export to the world. Niagara-on-the-Lake has around 30 local wineries that produce icewine and the town's Queen St. is the place to be to savour their astonishing variety.

If your first experience of icewine was a sweet, thick taste that you haven't been eager to repeat, you're in for a surprise. Icewine is no longer cloyingly super syrupy. Instead, icewines taste fresh, clear, bright and intensely fruity in particular flavours such as peach, cherry, strawberry or apple, plus complex blends including spice and even chocolate. Yet they are much more like fresh fruit than sugar.

Icewine is wine made from grapes that have been allowed to freeze naturally on the vine. When harvested, the grapes are pressed while frozen, which leaves behind most of the water as ice, and results in very sweet, concentrated juice.

Icewine production is considered to have begun commercially in Ontario by Inniskillin in 1984. In 1991 they won a prestigious international award for their 1989 Vidal Icewine. Inniskillin icewine is now available in 73 countries around the world. To be labelled as icewine, the product must be certified by the authority Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) Ontario.

"While VQA standards state minus eight as the temperature to harvest icewine in, at Inniskillin we harvest at minus 10 for optimum quality," says Deborah Pratt who handles their public relations. "You can thank



▲ "We like wine. We like to do this on the weekends," say from left, Andrew Sitko, Jamie King, Serena Chassie and the designated driver, Evan Hernder, of Hernder Estate Wines.

Mother Nature for providing us with winters to produce what we like to call extreme winemaking."

Role of the Escarpment

"Our vineyards benefit from the constant circulation of off-shore breezes between Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment, which moderate seasonal temperatures," explains Carly Rupcic, marketing project coordinator for Pillitteri Estates

Winery. "This means that in the fall, breezes from warm Lake Ontario extend the growing season, giving our grapes a longer time to develop their flavours, and holding off frost for a longer period which lowers the risk of losing grapes before the winter's icewine harvest."

Joe Will, owner of Strewn Winery, puts it another way. "The key is the micro climate between the top of the

Escarpment and the shores of Lake Ontario. The interplay of the Escarpment and the lake moderation takes the edge off most winter low temperatures. This allows the vines and the buds carrying next year's crop to survive through the winter, yet some nights still get cold enough, at least minus eight C and preferably minus 10 to minus 12, that the grapes freeze and give

◀ Kailey Preece of Niagara College Teaching Winery pours Prodigy Icewine 2010.





the concentration that makes icewine so intense.”

“The soils have been pushed around by glaciers to create interesting soil combinations,” adds Michèle Bosc, director of marketing for Château des Charmes. “It’s a winegrower’s dream to be able to experiment with so many nuances of growing conditions and taste their impact on the finished wine. Most of the time you hear of the impact of *terroir* on table wines. Icewine is also influenced by the same thing. We have a wonderful location to grow world-class wines and we are guaranteed to get a blast of winter every year. Often, the ideal conditions are in the middle of the night in January or February and the wind is howling along with the coyotes.”

“The microclimate between Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment moderates our winters and in summer, evens out the temperatures,” says Steve Gill, general manager of Niagara College Teaching Winery. “This is friendlier for all types of fruit. We have

◀ Fabian Reis, part of Konzelmann Estate Winery, serving Riesling Icewine.



great farming and growing. But without the Niagara Escarpment, we wouldn’t be able to do it.”

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Tasting Notes

Château des Charmes

Many varieties of *vitis vinifera* (the noble grape varieties of Europe) have been used to make icewine but the most commonly used is Vidal. Others include Cabernet Franc and Riesling. We also make icewine from a very rare grape variety called Savagnin. Icewine is a rare, explosive, sweet treat for your taste buds.

Michèle Bosc, director of marketing

Coyote’s Run Estate Winery

The 2008 Riesling Icewine has amazing flavours, fantastic aromas, great freshness, and lingers on the palate for a very long time. We like to use exclusively Riesling for our icewines, as we feel that this most noble of white grapes is superior in that it delivers great flavours, but also the zesty acidity needed to provide balance to the wine.

Jeff Aubry, president

Inniskillin

The high acidities in our grapes make icewine production ideal as these acidities are needed to balance the high concentration of natural sugar left in the icewine juice. We use three different grapes, Vidal, Riesling and Cabernet Franc, to produce our current collection of icewines with the Vidal being used for three different styles, oak-aged, non-oaked, and sparkling.

Deborah Pratt, winery public relations

Buy tokens ahead of time, \$3 each. Samples cost one or two tokens each. ►





▲ Enjoying the festival on Queen St.: Janet and Danny Lumiss, Nina Otulakowski of Niagara-on-the-Lake, with Cisco Kid.

Enjoying the Festival

Remember to dress warmly, as this event is outside. Warm, waterproof boots will help as the snow can get slushy. Niagara-on-the-Lake shops

welcome visitors to step inside and warm up, of course preferably browsing and buying something as well. Admission to the festival is free, but sampling requires tokens that must be



▲ Sous chef Danial Tong offering Epicurean chocolate cups with ganache and edible gold.

bought at the entrance. Last year tokens cost \$3 each, and some samples were two tokens. Food samples also cost tokens. Calculate how many drink samples you want to try, but

pace yourself. There are several wineries taking part. It's always possible to go to the first tent to buy more tokens.

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Lakeview Cellars

The Vidal grape variety lends itself very well to icewine production as it is a very winter-hardy grape with a thick skin and has unique flavours of honey, peach and apricot.

Meagan Bates, acting marketing coordinator

Niagara College Teaching Winery

The Cabernet Franc vines at the college give us dark purple-red dry table wines with dark berry fruit, and smoky and savoury character. When left to hang for icewine the same vines produce intensely tawny-coloured dessert wines with rich notes of strawberry-rhubarb jam and honey.

Gavin Robertson, assistant winemaker

Pillitteri Estates Winery

We have taken chances in producing unique varieties. We get to experiment with these rare varieties resulting in icewines with intense, concentrated flavours ranging from honey, mango and brown sugar, to nutmeg, black pepper spice and red licorice.

Carly Rucic, marketing project coordinator

Southbrook Vineyards

We are able to produce icewine of exceptional purity, concentration, balance and distinctiveness. We were able to harness great concentration of fruit from the hot 2010 vintage, and with the thick skins in Vidal, capture a rich and perfumed juice within the frozen grapes to create an opulent icewine with freshness and vitality.

Brian Hamilton, winemaker

Strewn Winery

Vidal grapes make for a very rich icewine with a zesty finish when well balanced. Riesling's great acidity allows for an almost refreshing experience even with the residual sugar. Cabernet Franc has strawberry flavours with spicy notes and crispness. Cabernet Sauvignon has more intense berry traits with dark chocolate and spice.

Marc Bradshaw, winemaker

Sunnybrook Farm Estate Winery

We make several iced fruit wines. Currently available are iced apple, iced peach and iced cherry. The tree fruits are tree ripened, picked and frozen to create sweet dessert wines bursting with fruit flavour.

Vivian Goertz, owner



It's important to have a designated driver or to go by taxi or limo, or even to stay overnight nearby in a hotel or bed and breakfast, of which there are many in the area. Remember that it gets dark and cold early in January, so arriving in the early afternoon may be better than the late afternoon.

Servers love to talk about their wines and can help you identify what you're tasting. Ask them questions about their wines and wineries, and you'll have a richer experience than simply drinking your way through the tents. Take notes of your favourite samples, and ask where they can be bought. Many are in such limited supply that they're only available at the wineries.

The 2013 Niagara-on-the-Lake Icewine Festival is scheduled for the weekends from Jan. 11 to 27. For information, see icewinefestival.com or call 905 688 0212. **NEV**





▲ Sunnybrook Farms' Iced Cherry Fruit Wine was served at the previous festival. Made of 100 per cent cherries, its taste had a refreshing touch of tartness. Photo courtesy Sunnybrook Farm Estate Winery.

◀ People admire the ice sculptures carved on site for the festival.

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Icewine Festival takes over the retail stretch of Queen St. for a weekend in January. Local wineries offer samples. ▶

