

Winter Magic: The glory of true ice wines

By Dave Sit | Jan 20, 2019 | Ithaca.com



Rows of frozen Vidal grapes.
Photo by Matt Kelly

It's early morning deep into December in the Finger Lakes. You are driving along one of the deserted wine routes in the region. The temperature is in the lower teens. The vineyards along the road look barren and desolate in the snowy landscape. Yet in the distance, you spy a few workers moving quickly along a row of vines, their breaths appearing as puffs of smoke. They couldn't possibly be picking grapes. Those grapes must be frozen solid in this cold! Well, you are witnessing the beginning of the making of a truly magical wine: ice wine.

Eiswein (ice wine in German) has been produced in Germany for centuries. Folklore pegged its origin to the 1790s in the Franconia region, when an early and harsh winter left the vintners with no choice but to make wine from the frozen grapes. Thus, Eiswein was born.

Ice wine didn't make its debut in the New World until 1972, when Walter Hainle, a German immigrant, made an ice wine by happenstance at his winery in British Columbia, the result of an unexpected early frost. In the early 1980s, Inniskillin Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake began purposefully leaving Vidal grapes on the vines to freeze. Soon after, those ice wines began winning international awards, and Canada—especially the Niagara area—became renowned for its ice wines.

In America, the first ice wine was made in 1981 by Great Western, the pioneering sparkling wine producer located in Hammondsport in the Finger Lakes. Art Hunt, the affable and folksy owner of Hunt Country Vineyards, remembered tasting that Vidal and being amazed by its concentrated flavors. A year later, he happened to be walking in one of the Taylor Wine Company's vineyards on a very cold day in late November and noticed that a block of grapes had not been picked yet. Hunt said, "So I went over and tried one of the frozen grapes and it tasted like the most amazing sorbet!" Eureka! Hunt had caught the ice wine bug.

Art Hunt's family settled in the western side of Keuka Lake back in 1820 and has been farming the land ever since. Their first vineyard was planted in 1902. In 1973, Hunt and his wife Joyce took over the family farm and grew grapes to sell to the Taylor Wine Company. But the bottom fell out after only a few years when Coca Cola, Taylor's corporate parent, moved its wine operations to the West Coast, leaving its growers high and dry. By then, the wine market in America had shifted dramatically from sweet red wine to drier white wines as part of the nation-wide health movement. Not only were those growers left without a buyer for their grapes, their vineyards were saddled with out-of-fashion wine grapes such as Concord and Dechaunac.

Hunt knew that to survive, he had to sell his own wines. He founded Hunt Country Vineyards in 1981 and began replacing some of the old undesirable grape vines with more popular ones. In 1985, he field-grafted an acre of his vineyard with the Vidal grape. Vidal is a French hybrid grape bred to be winter-hardy and capable of ripening with high sugar content even in cool climate.

"In 1987, we had a full crop of Vidal and decided to leave them all to pick later for ice wine," Hunt said. "Everything came out perfectly and the wine began winning awards once it was in the bottle."

With some interruptions caused by Mother Nature, Hunt has been producing ice wines since, and is the oldest continuing ice wine producer in the country.

Making ice wine is full of inherent risks. Not all varieties are suitable in making ice wine. The grape berries need to have thick skin to weather the tough wintry conditions. Besides Vidal, cool-climate vinifera grapes such as Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Cabernet Franc are good candidates. Come fall, growers have to decide if they are going to leave some grapes on the vines to be picked later for ice wine.

“The first thing is, the grapes need to be clean, sound and quite ripe, so you can’t have an overcropped situation,” Hunt explained.

Nettings are installed to drape over the vines to keep the grapes from being eaten by birds and deer.

“We net the vines usually after the normal harvest is done,” Hunt added. “Otherwise, every bird in the county will be coming for dessert.”

As the grape clusters hang on the vine, they darken in color and develop the plummy, raisiny and honey flavors. But perils abound. Rain could promote rot, high winds could pull the clusters right off the vines, sleet could damage the grapes and the weather might not cooperate. When the conditions are right, as temperatures drop down to 18 degrees Fahrenheit and below for a day or more, workers march out to the vineyard to collect the frozen bounty, each grape as hard as a marble.

Hunt said they’ve never harvested ice wine grapes before Thanksgiving, and the wait sometimes stretches into January. The yield from ice wine grapes could be as low as 20 percent of what they would have produced as still wines. All these factors mean that ice wine is costly to make and not much gets made each vintage, if at all. It is no wonder that true ice wines are expensive, costing upwards of \$30 per half bottle (375 milliliters). But do remember, this is a wine to be sipped, so a little goes a long way.

After harvest, the frozen grapes must be pressed immediately, in the cold, to prevent them from melting. A high-pressure basket press is routinely used to slowly push out the concentrated juice, while leaving the ice crystals behind. The process could take 8 to 12 hours to complete.

Fermentation of grape juice with such high sugar contents is not smooth. Special yeast strains are often used and sometimes fermentation might stop all together and need to be restarted. What finally goes into the bottle is a wonderfully aromatic and sweet elixir that is not only a dessert wine, but dessert itself.

I sat down with Art Hunt in his winery’s café to taste his 2016 Vidal Blanc Ice Wine. The grapes were not harvested until the first week of January. It was a monumental wine: medium golden in color, very ripe and tropical, beautifully honeyed, focused and delineated. The concentration of this wine is

something to behold, as the ample lively acidity springs a vibrancy in the mouth. Even with its 19.8 percent residual sugar it does not come across as cloying; this majestic infant will develop for decades. I scored it 95 points. It won both the 2017 Jefferson Cup for Best Dessert Wine and the 2018 New York Wine Classic Best Ice Wine awards.

In recent decades, a technological short-cut has been introduced to obviate the risks of exposing the grapes on the vines for such a long period of time. Grapes are picked at normal harvest times or shortly after. They are then sent to a commercial freezer facility, where they are frozen slowly. After that, the wine is made in the same process. By U.S. law, these post-harvest frozen wines cannot be called “ice wine.” You might see them labeled as “iced” wine, “ice-style” wine, or similar monikers. Only true frozen-on-the-vine ice wines could be labeled as such.

I have tasted numerous commercially-frozen dessert wines, and some of them were quite outstanding. They exhibit a purity and expression of fruit that is very alluring. But to me, the true or natural ice wines possess something more. Perhaps it’s the extra hang-time on the vines that creates that additional complexity and majesty, or maybe it’s the romance of those frozen grapes bravely standing up to the harshness of the elements. Regardless, there is magic in every sip.

So, on a cold winter night, relish a glass of true ice wine, slowly, just like its long journey from the vine to your glass.