

WINE

ICE WINE – Debonné Vineyards, Ohio

Paul Liikala

It's not an activity for couch potatoes. Imagine crawling on your hands and knees on snow-covered ground. You take a deep breath and a blast of frigid air burns your lungs. As you exhale, the warm, moist air instantly becomes a frozen vapor trail, blown away by an icy wind. Surrounded by darkness, the cold appears even more severe and intimidating. Hour after hour, they crawl along the ground, dragging their ever-filling containers. Hands and knees become ice cold. Their damp, frosted clothing sucks heat from their bodies.

Who are these people who willingly subject themselves to such discomfort? Some are employees of the vineyards; however, many are volunteers who take great pride in testing their endurance against the harsh elements. All the while they are helping to create a frozen nectar, whose taste and sweetness would bring pleasure to a Nordic god. They are ice-wine pickers.

"The ice wine pickers, who volunteer to harvest frozen grapes, usually are outdoor people. They are adventurous and like to test themselves," said Tony Debevc, owner of Debonné Vineyards in Madison, Ohio. "Many of them like strenuous activities like marathon running, climbing, biking, cross country skiing, etc. Picking frozen grapes in freezing temperatures is not for the faint of heart. However, many of them come back year after year to pick ice wine grapes."

Ice wine gets its name from when it's picked and how it is made. It originated in Germany in the 1800s and



Precise freezing temperatures produce a super, sweet ice-wine grape.

Ice-wine grape pickers need to be able to withstand harsh winter conditions.



came to North America in the 1990s, when it was produced in Canada's Niagara Peninsula. Debevc started making ice wine in the winter of 2000.

"We use a hybridized grape, Vidal Blanc, for our ice wine," said Debevc. "It has many of the same characteristics as the famous German Riesling grape. Vidal



Frozen grapes in a basket press waiting to be squeezed into a thick, syrupy liquid

Creating ice wine is a labor of love. When done correctly, it garners many medals.



Blanc makes a fine, dry white wine. In our region, it also is ideal for making ice wine.”

Besides wonderful fruit characters, Vidal Blanc grapes are tough. Their thick skins and hardy stems allow the fruit to stay on vine during severe cold. This is critical for an ice-wine grape.

In the fall, after a heavy November frost, the grape leaves fall off the vines. Following this, the workers quickly ensconce the grape trellis in a thin plastic mesh. This is done to ward off migrating flocks of birds that can strip a vineyard clean in a day. This also deters hungry deer and raccoon that prowl the vineyards at night.

Once the vines are covered, it is a waiting game for ideal weather conditions. The most important factor is the temperature. Picking will be done only when the temperature is between 15 and 18 degrees Fahrenheit. At these temperatures, the sugar content in the grape is around 36-40 percent. The correct temperature forms just enough ice crystals in the grape. This reduces the percentage of water in the fruit.

The exact liquid content is

critical. Grapes are not picked at lower temperatures because the sugar content rises to 50 percent or more. At this concentration, there is so little unfrozen water that it won't flow. Conversely, if the grapes are picked at 19 degrees or higher, the sugar level is too weak for a good ice wine.

Generally, the harvesting is done at night. The temperature then usually is more consistent, especially if there is wind with a cloud cover. However, twice in the past 10 years, the grapes were picked in the daytime. Blizzard conditions allowed for consistent daytime temperatures, due to the driving wind and thick cloud cover. Those snowy days must have been especially exciting for the ice-wine pickers who really enjoy the wild side.

When picking, the workers must first cut the bottom of the plastic mesh surrounding the grape vines. By tractor headlights, they scoop up fallen grapes. Next, they pluck the grapes from the frozen vines. The grapes are hard as marbles. While the picking is going on, other workers truck the picked fruit to concrete structures that are super insulated. If the temperature exceeds 18 degrees, the harvesting stops. The waiting game starts again until ideal temperatures reoccur.

Once at the winery, about a half-ton of grapes is pressed in an old fashion basket press. A six-inch hydraulic piston smashes the fruit and stems with a force of 300 pounds per square inch. It takes an hour and a half to two hours to squeeze out the highly viscous fluid. Its consistency resembles maple syrup. One press and two baskets are used during the process. The grapes must be kept between 15-18 degrees while being pressed. If allowed to warm, the grapes' ice crystals start melting, diluting the liquid's sugar content and ruining the batch.

When fermenting, a special yeast is used that is resistant to high sugar levels. It ferments slowly because of the concentrated sugars and flavors. Ice wine

fermentation usually takes two to three times longer than the time required for regular wines. The amount of ice wine generated from an acre of frozen grapes is about one-sixth the yield of a fall grape harvest for table wines. If an acre of vineyards produces 1,000 gallons of table wine, it would yield only about 166 gallons of ice wine. Each year, Debonné Vineyards produces between 800 to 1,500 gallons of ice wine.

“Ice wine creates a starburst of flavor,” said Debevc. “This is because it has double the sugar and twice the flavor components. This is a dessert type of beverage because of the sweetness and intense flavor. To complement the meal, it should be served with a nice cheesecake or fruit. Sip and savor its flavors. It is not meant to be drunk in quantity.”

Debevc was fastidious to distinguish his ice wine from iced wine. He does not produce iced wine. Iced wine is a shortcut that takes fall-harvested grapes and immediately puts them in a freezer. Once frozen, they are squeezed in a press. He truly believes that these cryogenic iced wines are inferior to the naturally frozen ice wine.


“I wouldn’t be doing all that we are doing, less yield and picking in severe weather conditions, unless we truly believed what we are doing is the best thing for an ice wine,” said Debevc. “Apparently, it is worth it because even though our ice wine is more expensive, our customers buy all that we produce.”

Debonné Vineyards is located in the Grand River Valley, in Madison, Ohio. It was one of the first wineries started there in 1971. Now there are about a dozen other wineries in the region. The Grand River Valley has ideal grape soils. The close proximity of Lake Erie to the north provides lake-effect weather conditions that are ideal for the wine growers. Best of all, the lake’s blustery winter helps to create a great, sweet-tasting ice wine that makes all the hard work, reduced yield and

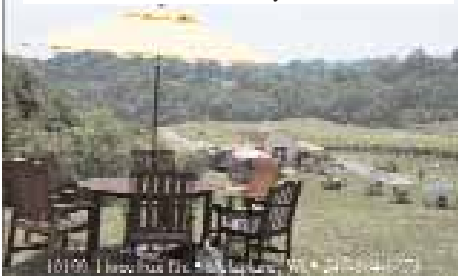
specialized processing worth it.

For more information on ice wine and the Debonné Vineyards, visit www.debonne.com.

Paul Liikala has written for more than three dozen magazines and newspapers. He was the past Ohio editor for *Outdoor Life* magazine, and recent articles have appeared in *Crappie World*, *Outdoor News*, *The Suburbanite*, and *Fur-Fish-Game*. He co-hosted the award-winning *Tackle Box* radio show and does public speaking.

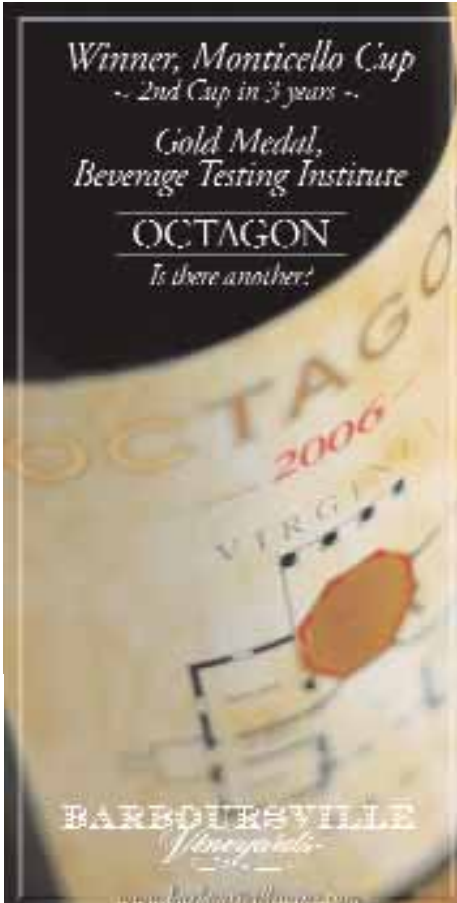


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