

# Cold as Ice

SUMPTUOUSLY RICH, INDULGENTLY SWEET, SURPRISINGLY  
NUANCED – CANADIAN ICEWINE OFFERS A DIFFERENT  
EXPERIENCE OF THE GRAPE, AS JIM CLARKE EXPLAINS



In most wine regions, January is a quiet time; not so in Niagara. The majestic Falls may be clogged with ice, and the snow may cover the vineyards, but 10 days into the new year Bruce Nicholson, winemaker at **Inniskillin** ([inniskillin.com](http://inniskillin.com)), is out in the -12° C weather, finishing up the harvest. The press is filled with what looks like a giant hockey puck – frozen vidal blanc grapes. The block will be broken up and re-pressed several times to extract the juice destined to become Inniskillin’s and the region’s most famous product, icewine.

This frosty fruitage isn’t inherently Canadian – it was first made in Germany or perhaps Austria – but no other wine has become so associated with the country, and with the Niagara Peninsula in particular. “Icewine is what put Niagara on the map,” says Toronto-based sommelier Will Predhomme. “It’s like maple syrup; it’s something we’ve just got.” Like maple syrup, it’s also sweet; sweeter, in fact, than classic European dessert wines like sauternes or tokaji.

Canada’s famously cold winters are just one factor making icewine possible. Warm, continental summers – warm enough to support pear, cherry and even peach orchards – foster ripe grapes, too, and dry autumns prevent the grapes from rotting while they hang on the vine into December, January or even March in some vintages. When the grapes do freeze, the ice separates from the sugars, flavour components and acids; once pressed, the concentration of all those components – not just the sugars – creates a rich and opulent wine which remains fresh and not cloying. “I don’t like to use the »



A tableau of wintertime impressions in snowy Niagara; bottom right: sommelier Fred Gamula at the Prince of Wales restaurant

word ‘sweet’,” says Nicholson, “I like the word ‘concentrated’. Instead of talking sweetness, we’re talking texture.”

Viticulture in this expanse dates back to 1811; Inniskillin and three other wineries first left grapes on the vine to make icewine in 1983. Today they and other larger producers like **Jackson-Triggs** ([jacksontriggswinery.com](http://jacksontriggswinery.com)) and **Peller** ([peller.com](http://peller.com)) work mostly (75-80 per cent) with the hybrid vidal blanc alongside riesling and cabernet franc varieties. Each grape has its own qualities, says Predhomme. Vidal is more “over the top”, richer and heavier, characterised by peach and candy floss aromas, while “riesling has a more tropical, grapefruit or citrus character, and more acidity to balance sweetness.” Cabernet franc versions are often best described as smelling like strawberry jam. Some smaller wineries embrace cabernet sauvignon, a favourite at **Konzelmann** ([konzelmann.ca](http://konzelmann.ca)), another older property, while a newer winery, **Stratus** ([stratuswines.com](http://stratuswines.com)), makes both of its icewines from unusual blends – cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, mourvedre and syrah in the red, and viognier and merillon in the white.

“What makes it all work here is the lake,” says Daniel Speck, of family-owned **Henry of Pelham** ([henryofpelham.com](http://henryofpelham.com)). “The lake [Ontario] creates cooling air in the summer but is giving off heat in the winter.” That cool air moderates the summer temperatures to create an even growing season, and the added warmth in winter ensures the vines aren’t killed by the subzero cold – a threat most other wine regions don’t have to worry about. Locking that airflow into a narrow band along the south edge of the lake is the Niagara Escarpment, a ridge and broad terrace (known as the Bench) running west from the US border; without it those air currents would simply dissipate across the Niagara Peninsula. Vineyards extend from the ridge down the Bench to the lakeside, dotted with villages, wooded groves and streams.

These conditions favour quality dry wines as well: Stratus focuses on blends in its dry wines; **Flat Rock** ([flatrockcellars.com](http://flatrockcellars.com)), meantime, demonstrates the region’s potential for classical, ageworthy chardonnay and pinot noir, eschewing icewine entirely; and **Cave Spring** ([cavespringcellars.com](http://cavespringcellars.com)) has made a speciality of riesling. “Dry wine is where the future is,” says Tom Pennachetti, Cave Spring’s vice-president for marketing and sales.

Even Inniskillin, the icewine pioneer, produces dry wines, but icewine is its signature and is treated with all due deference. The tasting room keeps aged examples on hand – a 1994 vidal blanc, perhaps, alive with complex honey and gingerbread aromas – which usually impress most visiting oenophiles. And when Niagara is done with their frigid harvest, they do what other wine-growing areas do: celebrate with three weeks of festivals and music in the streets. Just dress warmly if you go. ♦

## The Essentials

### BEDDING DOWN

Perched lakeside at the mouth of the Niagara River, **Harbour House** ([niagarasfinest.com](http://niagarasfinest.com)) offers B&B-style cosiness, or go Victorian without skimping on modern conveniences like a spa and indoor pool at the **Prince of Wales** ([vintage-hotels.com](http://vintage-hotels.com)). Both are well situated for winery visits, but the **Inn on the Twenty** ([innonthetwenty.com](http://innonthetwenty.com)) makes it that much easier by sharing its location with Cave Spring Cellars – you won’t even have to go outside in the cold.

### DINING OUT

Niagara-on-the-Lake’s Old World charms come to the table at **Hob Nob** ([niagarasfinest.com](http://niagarasfinest.com)) offering all the day’s meals plus high tea. Many of the area’s wineries have restaurants on site: **Peller Estates** ([peller.com](http://peller.com)) makes the most of the combination with great vineyard views, well-considered pairings and wines thoughtfully incorporated into the dishes themselves. And moving beyond just wine to the orchards and farms, the menu at **Treadwell Farm** ([treadwellcuisine.com](http://treadwellcuisine.com)) highlights seasonal local ingredients.

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