

The Standard

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Icewine; Mining Niagara gold



Jamie Macfarlane, Ice House's winemaker and part owner, helped make one of the first Ontario Icewines in the early 1980s. staff photo by bob Tymczyszyn

I By MONIQUE BEECH

The weathered hardwood floors of the 118-year-old peach packing barn are smooth from years of heavy work boots stomping on the golden planks. The corridor where horse-drawn carriages once hauled tender fruit still lines the building.

These days, stainless steel tanks holding litres of fermenting Vidal and Cabernet Sauvignon Icewine fill the narrow trench.

In the same open space, there's a wine-tasting bar that looks like a guy's rec room with puffy leather couches and bar stools.

This cosy, rustic winery on Niagara Parkway is more an afterthought for Ice House Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Local tourist traffic will be welcome this summer, but tucked away at the end of the tasting bar are hints of where the Icewine-focused producer's fortunes rest.

"I got that on a trip to Vietnam," said Jamie Macfarlane, Ice House's winemaker and part owner, pointing to a gong.

Behind that, a sign for Ice House is written both in English and Japanese.

"From a trip to Japan," Macfarlane, 51, explained.

Since launching in 2005, the peninsula's newest Icewine specialist has focused on the lucrative Asian market - China, Japan. Nearly all of the 3,000 cases it annually makes is destined for Pacific Rim countries.

His bottles - adorned with polar bears and an arctic sky - are meant to evoke the romance of a Canadian winter and attract Asian buyers.

"Certainly, from a Canadian perspective, we don't really understand Icewine as a beverage," Macfarlane said. "The Asians, and the capitalist Chinese, are the ones that like it at the moment."

Macfarlane, and several other Niagara Icewine producers, are following the cash flow.

Icewine, a complex sweet wine made from grapes frozen on the vine, accounts for just six per cent of Ontario's wine production, but nearly 80 per cent of export sales.

In 2007, wineries netted \$11.7 million from exporting Icewine - or 40 per cent of overall Icewine sales. The top markets are the United States, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Singapore. But China, with 1.3 billion people and a burgeoning middle class, is the fastest-growing market.

Canadian Icewine sales there have tripled to \$1.1 million since 2004.

With Icewine selling for upwards of \$100 a bottle, the Chinese are increasingly grabbing for the golden goose.

Since 2000, Canadian Icewine fakes, with prices undercutting the real thing, have popped up on shelves with names such as Toronto Icewine and Rocky Mountain Icewine.

"I think there's going to be a huge challenge when the Chinese start planting grapes for Icewine," said Toronto-based wine critic Tony Aspler, who has written about the Canadian industry for more than 30 years.

"They're going to be able to do it a lot cheaper, and they're in the process of doing that. That's the big challenge. I think this will have a really difficult effect on Icewine exports to China."

Many producers are worried about the lack of clear regulations for China's estimated 500 wineries - opening the door for fakes.

John Schriener, Vancouver-based author of *Icewine: The Wine of Winter*, said there's apparently Icewine regulations in China, but it's hard to gauge if they're stringent.

"There are probably regulations against lead paint, too, but it still keeps showing up," Schriener said.

"I think the Chinese are going to make real Icewine in their market. They're starting to make real Icewine in their market. It will have to be solved by the Chinese in China."

Macfarlane isn't worried.

To make Icewine, it takes the right climate to grow grapes, to naturally refrigerate and freeze them.

Too warm, and the grapes won't freeze on the vine and reach the right sugar levels, requirements agreed upon after a series of international trade agreements.

In 2000, the world's largest Icewine producers - Canada, Germany and Austria - stipulated Icewine grapes must be picked at a minimum of -7°C and 34 brix, a sugar measurement.

(Vintners Quality Alliance of Ontario requires a minimum of -8°C and 35 brix).

The production pockets in China might be limited, Macfarlane said.

"If you look at the Chinese market and you taste those table wines that they're making, (Icewine production dominance) is not going to happen in my lifetime," said Macfarlane, 51, who worked for several years at Kittling Ridge Estate Wines in Grimsby and the former Brights Wines and Andres (now Andrew Peller Ltd).

Macfarlane helped make one of the first Ontario Icewines in the early 1980s.

"They have a long way to go to figuring out what to do. If they want to do it, they'll do it."

The Canadian Vintners Association has worked with several countries to try to stop fakes. President Dan Paszkowski said the organization has had success educating consumers about authentic Icewine in countries, such as Taiwan, where fakes were once rampant.

China still poses a problem.

Recently, three Chinese businessmen have attempted to trademark the Vintners Quality Alliance name and its logo in the People's Republic. If successful, Canadian wineries exporting to China would have to pay a fee to have VQA on their label.

The CVA has hired a legal team to defend VQA, and expects to be successful in protecting the distinctly Canadian branding, Paszkowski said.

Over at the Ice House, Macfarlane said he isn't losing any sleep over whether China is the next big Icewine producer or if his product will be imitated.

The rich complexity of Canadian Icewine sets it apart.

"I think (the Chinese) are good at making a knockoff of a Honda or something where you can't tell the difference or an iPod. But they can't make the taste that we make. When you taste it, those who know Icewine and understand Icewine, I think can tell the difference."

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