

Harvest

# The coldest vintage



Lucy Corne

**Never imagined you could get numb hands, frozen vines and sub-zero temperatures at a grape harvest? Allow yourself to experience the winter harvest for the world-renowned icewine in the Niagara region.**

Text **Lucy Corne**

The feeling gradually returned to my extremities, washing over me like the sun rising over a shady hilltop. Sipping on the sweet liquid that had subjected me to this icy hell was the final step of the thawing process, warming my throat with its syrupy texture and smooth alcoholic kick.

**Taking the first step**

In all honesty, I had hardly heard of icewine until a few months earlier and certainly never tasted it. It was on an autumn wine tour of Canada's Niagara region when I had my first sip of this luxurious, sweet wine, perfect for an after-dinner tippie or to warm up on a painfully chilly Canadian evening.



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▲ Clockwise from right: Inniskillin's Vidal - one of the most popular ice wines in the world; A lovely winter dusk at the Inniskillin Vineyard; The grapes are not harvested till they have frozen on the vines.

Facing page: Pails of frozen, ultra-sweet grapes waiting to be taken in for the wine-making process.

I suppose the whole exercise had been worth it in the end, but at 5 am that morning as I sat in the snow imploring the sun to hurry and make an appearance, I was far from seeing the positive side of my latest bright idea. My thirst for knowledge on all things wine-related (and of course, a thirst for the drink itself too) was the reason I was subjecting myself to this pre-dawn arctic torture. Rather than simply buying a bottle of Canada's sweet yet refreshing icewine, I had gone all out and opted to help out with the harvest. This poorly conceived plan meant that I was up when the lark was still enjoying its stage-four sleep, and was looking forward to a few hours of grape-picking in temperatures that would make brass monkeys weep.

Apart from sampling wine on that initial tour, I learnt a bit about the intricate process that goes into filling each sleek bottle. Imitation icewine uses simple, less painful methods to reach their goal – often freezing the grapes after harvesting or adding sugars to table wine. But the real thing, the wine that Canada is so rightly proud of, requires the grapes to freeze naturally on the vines before they are even considered to be plucked. Harvesting is planned with military precision and can only be carried out when temperatures have plummeted to a nose-numbing -8 degree Celsius for several consecutive days.

So as December dawned, I was on call and obsessively checking the weather forecast,



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▲ Above, left and below: You can either pick grapes by hand - the more fun and freezing experience - or ride a harvesting truck, which allows you a sweeping view of the vineyard.

half hoping for sub-zero temperatures, half wishing that the weather might misbehave and allow me to stay indoors. But the call did inevitably come from Inniskillin – one of the first and largest icewine producers in the country – saying they would be harvesting the next morning and my presence was expected.

### Picking out frozen grapes

Luckily, I was spared the moonlit harvest generally favoured by icewine producers. As serene and beautiful picking grapes in the middle of the night might be, I was happy to trade it for a little extra time in bed, though it was hardly a lengthy lie-in. With the harvest beginning an hour or so before dawn was due to break, I was Niagara-bound long before the sun was considering making an appearance.

Grabbing a plastic container from the pile, I joined the handful of other harvesters and began to snap grape bunches from their frozen vines. The Vidal grapes were frozen solid and I couldn't resist sneaking a taste. With the fruit's sugars concentrated, each grape has not only the texture of hardboiled candy, but the flavour as well. It was far sweeter than any grape I had previously sampled.

In fact, each frozen grape gives just one drop of icewine, explaining the high price tag when compared to other Canadian

wines. Of course, a bottle will last considerably longer too, since icewine is served in small measures, its thick, sweet taste too rich for gulping.

### A glimpse of the glorious sun

After filling a series of containers taken from a seemingly endless pile, I was thrilled to feel the sun's first rays attempting to thaw my mistreated extremities. Granted, temperatures were still in the minus range and in double digits at that, but I couldn't help feeling cheered by the sight of the sun. Soon, flocks of birds could be seen swooping in to try and steal the tasty sweetmeats from their stems, the netting only partially successful as a deterrent.

It was time to bring in the big guns. Not all harvesting is done by hand, and I was thrilled to be invited aboard the harvesting machine, a huge contraption that literally shakes the grapes off their vines, and through the nets below. From this height I could see the whole wine farm – the regular vineyards sitting under a blanket of snow, just waiting for their turn to shine; the emblematic Brae Burn Barn immortalised on Inniskillin's labels and most important of all, the tasting room.

### Tasting oasis

I climbed down from my heavy-duty steed and made a beeline for the tasting room – an elegant space and always my favourite



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▲ Clockwise from above: Each grape only gives a drop of wine which makes producing it an expensive and laborious affair; The Inniskillin wine estate; Riesling – another of Inniskillin’s famed wines.

Vidal’s tropical flavours blending perfectly with the bitterness of the bubbly.

I had learnt a lot during my short stint as an icewine harvester. A lot about wine and also a little about myself, which includes a discovery of my surprising ability to sit in the snow and manage to think away the cold. Sure, tasting time was by far my favourite moment, but would I head back to Niagara next year to pick frozen grapes with my frozen fingers? Sure! Besides, who knows – maybe next time I will be hoping for the call to say harvest will be happening under the moonlight.

stop on any wine tour. I was treated to Inniskillin’s full range of icewines – Vidal, Riesling and the brilliantly red and fruity Cabernet Franc – plus a champagne cocktail to finish, the sweetness of the

## Fact file

### Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to Toronto from Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai and Brussels. The Niagara Region is a 90-minute drive from Toronto.

### Best time to go

Tours at Inniskillin take place all through the year. Icewine tours and harvesting take place only in the month of January.

### Accommodation

Drop in at delightful guest houses in the Niagara-on-the-Lake region surrounding the vineyards. As low cost options go, Niagara Falls has its fair share of well-priced motels.

### Harvest

Harvesting takes place throughout January, but do call the Inniskillin winery to find out the dates. Of course, tours and tastings offer a less painful experience and take place daily throughout the year. Other wineries in the area also produce icewine and offer tastings and cellar tours. Crush Tours offer excellent guided tours that take you to three or four vineyards for CAD 100 that include a wonderful lunch and plenty of samples.

### For more information

[www.canada.travel](http://www.canada.travel)  
[www.inniskillin.com](http://www.inniskillin.com) for Inniskillin Wines  
[www.crushtours.com](http://www.crushtours.com) for Crush Tours



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