

Wineries turn frozen grapes into liquid gold

BY AL FROST

To the connoisseur ice wine, or "Eiswein," is liquid gold. Considered rare, ice wine is as popular as an after dinner wine or even as an aperitif. The wineries of northern Michigan have produced award-winning ice wines in recent years.

Originating in Franconia, Germany in 1794, ice wine must be naturally produced, with no artificial freezing allowed. The process to make a true ice wine is to leave grapes on the vines long after the traditional harvest.

Temperatures need to reach well below freezing for three to four days, and harvesting ice wine grapes is all a matter of timing.

"The internal temperatures of the grapes needs to reach 17 degrees," said

Lee Lutes, winemaker at Black Star Farms. "We sense when the grapes are getting cold enough and literally have people on call to help harvest the grapes."

The internal freezing of the grapes concentrates flavors and sugars resulting in a sweet wine with intense fruit flavors. Ice wines also require many grapes, in some cases 10 times as many as a regular bottle of wine.

Cold temperatures late last November and December allowed Lutes and a crew of 15 hearty souls to harvest ice wine grapes over a two-day period early in December of 2002.

"It was cold, in fact the one morning the temperature was 10 degrees and with the wind coming off of West Bay the wind chill was well below zero,"



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Valentena Alekseyenko picks Reisling grapes for ice wine last year on Old Mission Peninsula.

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said Lutes. "It will be well worth the effort as we harvested a record crop and one of quality."

The 2002 crop has some tough competition. Black Star Farms 2000 A capela Riesling Ice Wine took home several honors including Best of Category: 2002 Michigan State Fair, gold medals at the 2002 International Eastern Wine Competition, Grand Harvest Awards and Tasters Guild International Wine Judging, as well as silver medals at the 2002 Riverside International Wine Competition and the Los Angeles County Fair. Both of these competitions are considered benchmarks of the industry.

In addition to their success in these competitions, Black Star received a score of 87 in Wine Spectator.

Ice wines are produced primarily in Germany, Austria and Canada. The wine is a deep, rich amber and has a very sweet taste. The flavor is a combination of apricot, peach, mango or other sweet fruits. There is often a nutty smell to it as well. The wine is chilled for one or two hours. It is usually served in small cordial glasses.

Black Star is not alone in producing ice wines, several other wineries in the area also are creating great ice wines, but limited quantities are often made preventing them from entering wine competitions (many competitions require a minimum production to enter).

At Bel Lago Vineyards winemaker Charlie Edson produces a Pinot Grigio Ice Wine. His 2000 version has been popular with visitors to his tasting

room.

"This wine is incredible, I usually don't like sweet wines but this is an exception," said Joe Breidenstein, a recent visitor to Bel Lago. "I picked up hints of honey, peach, apricot and pear, quite frankly I have never tasted anything quite like it."

Breidenstein's enthusiasm is similar to many first time tasters of ice wine. He is among the lucky ones who caught Edson on a day when he had his ice wine available for tasting. Ice wines are usually not sampled at the tasting rooms primarily because of limited quantities. Prices in the region range from \$50 to \$100 for a 375 ml bottle.

Ice wine is to be savored and is usually enjoyed 2 ounces at a time. It pairs nicely with just about any dessert and even before dinner with cheese.

On the Old Mission Peninsula both Chateau Grand Traverse and Chateau Chantal produce ice wines. Both wineries have won awards over the years for their ice wines.

Al Frost writes from his home in northern Michigan.