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JULY 2013 \$8.95

ISSN 1793-3066



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THE MAKING OF ICE WINE : AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE

Cold Hard Facts

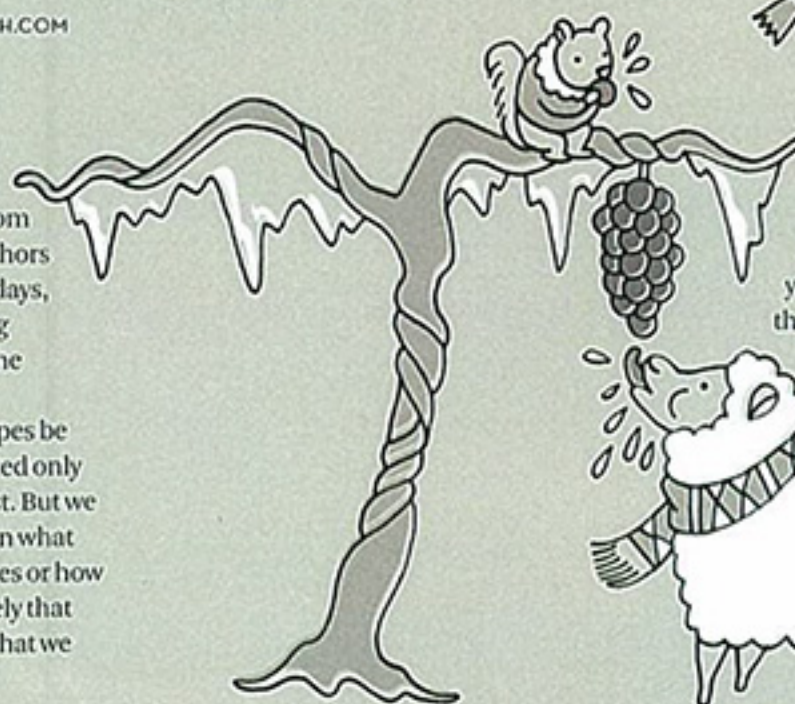
Like many great inventions, what started off as an accidental discovery has now become one of the greatest wines of the world. We delve into the history and making of eiswein.

BY KENNY LEONG | ILLUSTRATION BY KUANTH.COM

THE ROMANS

Extant historical records from famous Roman writers, authors and poets indicate in their days, people were already making wine from frozen grapes. The poet Martial is said to have recommended that the grapes be left on the vine, and harvested only when they are stiff with frost. But we have no surviving records on what the Romans did to the grapes or how the wine was made; it is likely that the actual wine resemble what we know today as late harvest.

CIRCA A.D. 50



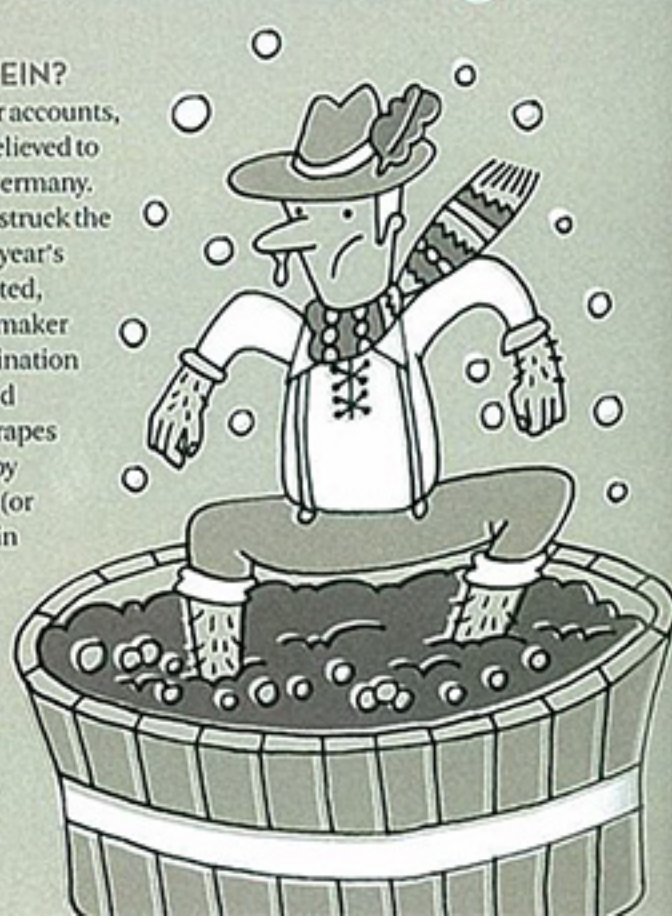
EISWEIN TAKES OFF
The onset of a severe winter in Rheinhessen in late 1829 forced winegrowers to leave bunches of grapes on the vine, harvesting them later with the intention of using them as fodder for animals. But they soon discovered that the frozen grapes yielded a very sweet must after pressing, so they turned it into eiswein. It is noteworthy that this followed the discovery and introduction of the spatlese and auslese designations, which were hugely popular in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

1830S

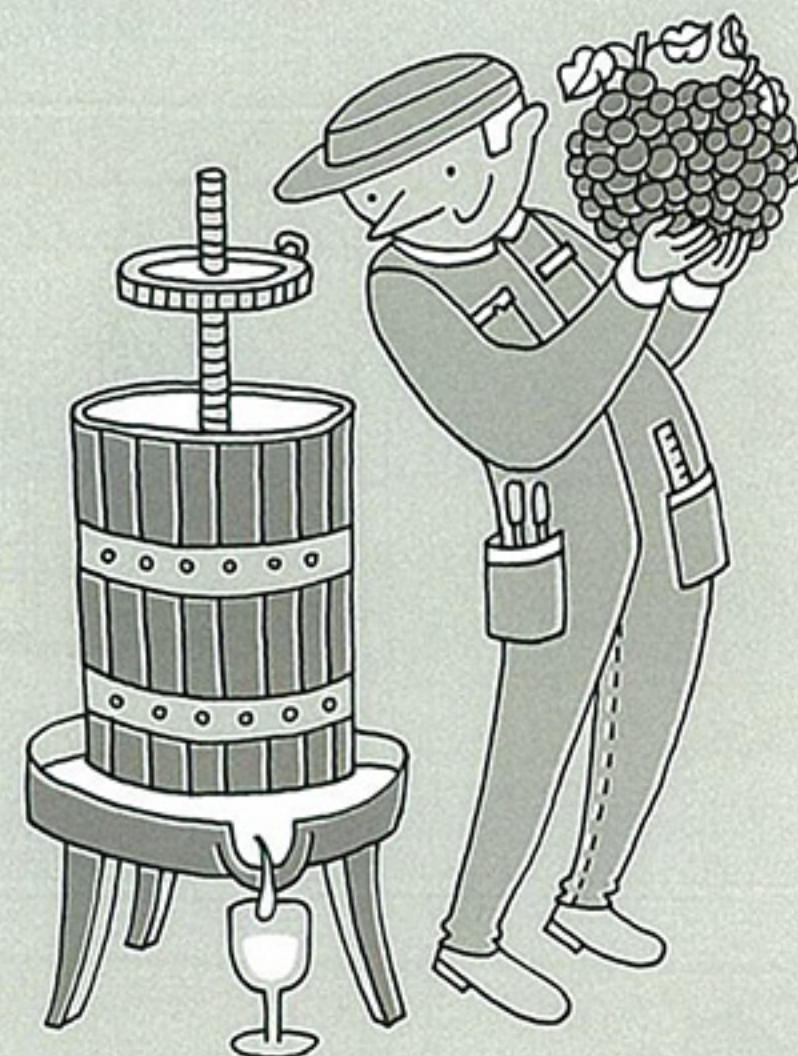
1700

THE FIRST EISWEIN?

According to popular accounts, the first ice wine is believed to have been made in Germany. Freezing conditions struck the vineyards before the year's crop could be harvested, but a stubborn winemaker with dogged determination harvested anyway and pressed the frozen grapes to make wine, thereby discovering ice wine (or eiswein in German) in the process.



1961



INVENTION INTERVENTION

Up until then, ice wine was still a rarity, given the extreme climatic conditions required for suitable fruit, and the immeasurable effort needed to produce something so low in volume. But the development of the pneumatic bladder press saw a surge in ice wine production, helped along by other inventions such as portable generators and plastic nets (to protect the fruit from being devoured by birds) that resulted in more efficient ways of harvesting and winemaking.



1984

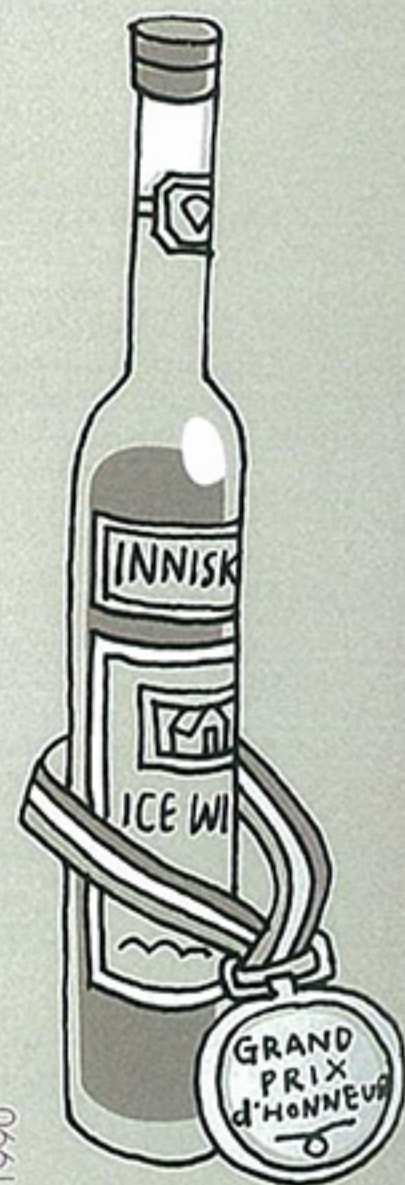
THE NEW FRONTIER

Canada's first commercially crafted ice wine, made under the watchful eye of Inniskillin's winemaker Karl Kaiser, surfaces. The wine was made from Vidal grapes, naturally frozen on the vine, on the winery site known as Brae Burn Vineyard. But the first ice wine ever produced in Canada dates back to 1972, when winemaker Walter Hainle, inspired by his Germanic roots, attempted to salvage a disastrous vintage by turning frosted grapes into wine. Although he initially had no intention to sell the wine, he did eventually release 178 bottles to the market in 1978. Today, a bottle of Hainle's ice wine is estimated to fetch more than a million dollars at wine auctions — not bad for something that almost didn't happen.

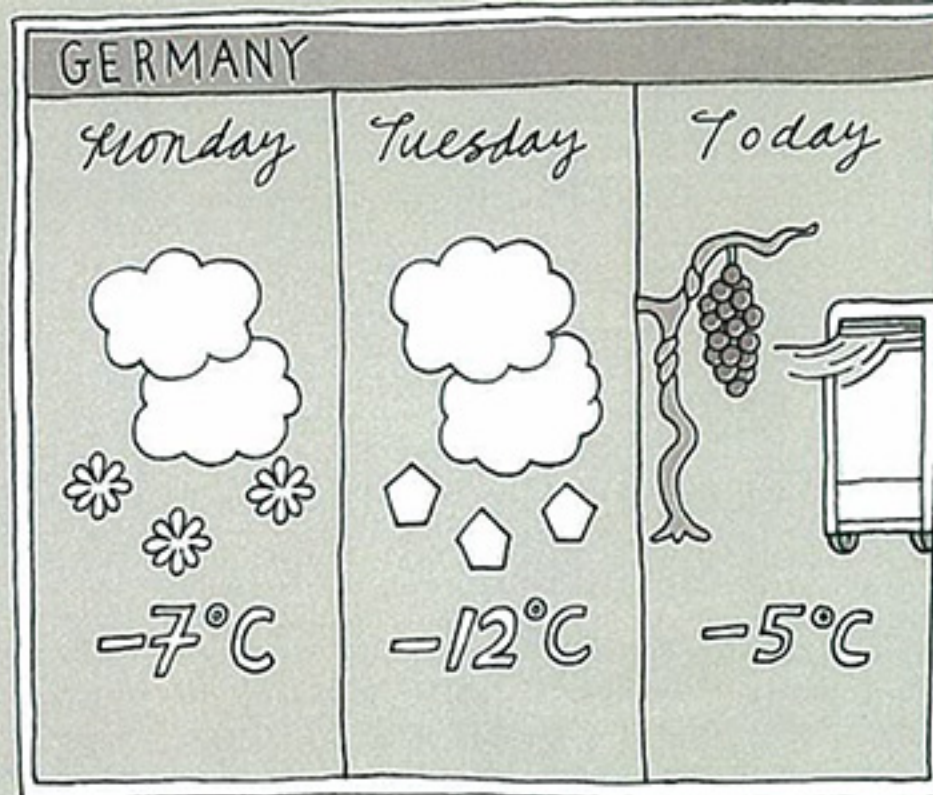
1990

MEDAL OF HONOUR

Inniskillin receives the Grand Prix d'Honneur in France for its 1989 Vidal ice wine, signifying a major turning point for the estate and sealing the position of Canadian ice wine on the global wine market.



Wine laws stipulate that fruit used for making ice wine must be naturally frozen on the vine (no artificial refrigeration) after the grapes have achieved the required level of ripening. Too early a frost would result in premature freezing, which renders the fruit unsuitable for making ice wine. In Germany, the temperature must fall at least -7°C , and in Canada -8°C . Too warm and the grapes might be lost to rot or other diseases or pests; too cold and the grapes might not yield any juice at all. In Germany, Riesling is considered the noblest grape for ice wine, while Vidal is highly popular in Ontario in Canada. But it is possible to make ice wine with any grape (even reds such as Cabernet Sauvignon) so long as the legal requirements are adhered to.



THE HARVEST

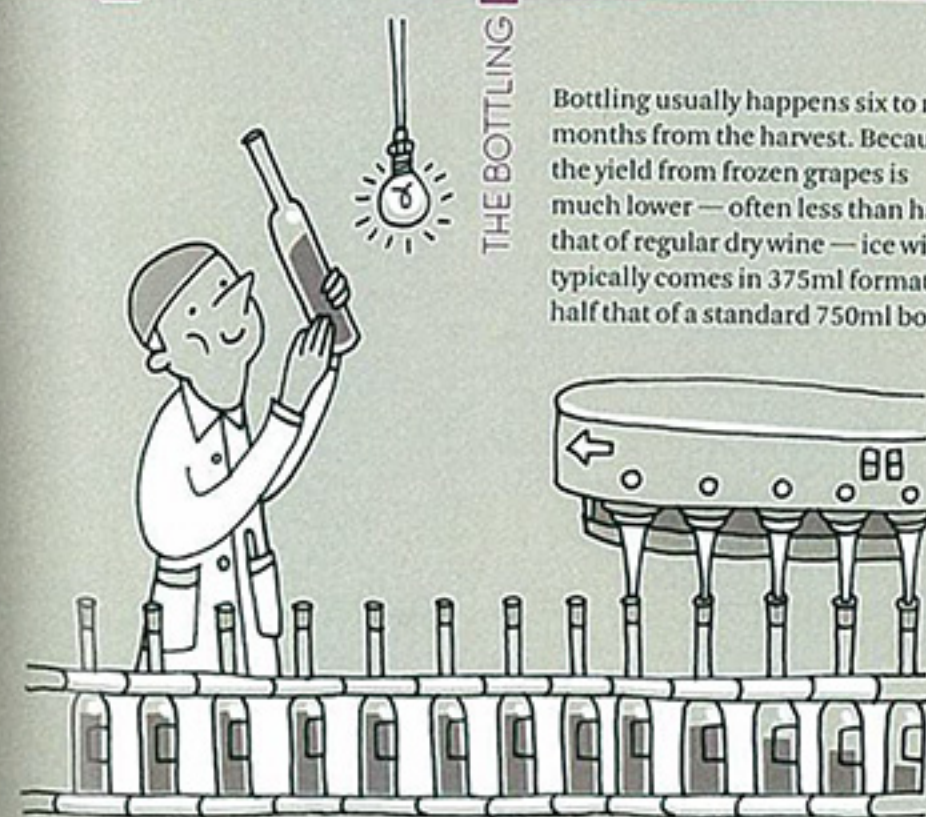
The vineyards are usually harvested in the wee hours of the morning, when the rest of the world is fast asleep. This ensures that the frozen grapes are brought in to the winery in perfect condition without rise in temperatures. The grape berries, now frozen solid, are pressed to extract the naturally concentrated juice. The groggy (and perhaps just slightly grumpy) cellar workers perform their tasks in unheated spaces, and each cycle typically lasts five to six hours.

THE TRANSFORMATION

Because of the high sugar content in the wine, fermentation occurs at a range of 15°C to 20°C over a period of about one to three months using specially formulated strains of yeasts, before the fermentation is arrested by lowering the temperatures to stop the process once the wine reaches nine to 12 per cent alcohol by volume. Through fermentation, the sweet, sticky must of the grapes become an elixir brimming with notes of exotic fruit.



While ice wines are said to have aging potential, in particular made from Riesling, the fact best enjoyed young, with all their exotic nose intact. Although commonly as dessert or party wines, they are suitable accompanying certain savoury dishes like cheeses. Or make yourself a wine martini by mixing it half with vodka and garnish with a few frozen grapes — a sure-to-chill out, all pun intended.



THE BOTTLING

Bottling usually happens six to nine months from the harvest. Because the yield from frozen grapes is much lower — often less than half that of regular dry wine — ice wine typically comes in 375ml formats, half that of a standard 750ml bottle.

SCHLOSS JOHANNISBERG
RIESLING EISWEIN 2008

UNIQUE FOOD & WINE

The nose opens with preserved plum, apricot, dried mango, candied fruit and nuanced bittersweet durian and Chinese almond aromas, leading to a honeyed, viscous palate brimming with overripe apple and orange flavours. Luscious and long on the finish.

INNISKILLIN CABERNET
FRANC ICEWINE 2008

CULINA

Nose of grapes, overripe cranberry and red fruits, baked blueberry tart and apple peel. A rich palate with a very smooth texture and luscious viscosity. It finishes with good length and some dry apple character at the back of the throat.

GUTZLER RIESLING
EISWEIN 2008

MAGMA

Rich aromas with notes of freshly cut apple and ripe peach. A medium-bodied palate (for an eiswein) with lovely acidity to balance. Extremely pleasant and refreshing, with an appealing candied orange finish.

WEINGUT LANDMANN
CABERNET CUBIN
EISWEIN 2006

MAGMA

Rich and concentrated with a nose that evokes blackberry and raspberry jam with a honeyed, candied white fruits character. Very rounded palate with creamy viscosity and just a touch of acidity to balance.

INNISKILLIN GOLD
AGED VIDAL ICEWINE

CULINA

Apricot, grapes, peach, sweet plum, mango and a touch of orange blossom on the nose. Rich, textured palate; medium-bodied with concentrated flavour and a very persistent finish, just bordering on being slight.