vinetur

German Eiswein: a tradition under threat

The declining era of german ice wine

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In the serene vineyards of Germany, a tradition nearly two centuries old faces a precarious future. German Eiswein, a cherished legacy that began in 1830, is witnessing a dramatic decline in production due to increasingly warmer winters, challenging the very essence of this unique wine.

Eiswein, or ice wine, is a product of an intricate process requiring the grapes to be frozen while still on the vine. The Deutsches Weininstitut (DWI) reveals a startling decrease in production areas, plummeting from 500 hectares in 2018 to a mere 32 hectares in just five years. Despite the introduction of Piwi grape varieties, known for their resistance to fungal diseases and extreme temperatures, the reversal of this downtrend seems a distant possibility.

The situation is stark: in regions like Rheinhessen, Württemberg, Franken, and Mosel, viticulturists face the harsh reality that if temperatures do not drop sufficiently, entire crops can be lost. In some cases, these grapes are repurposed for making Beerenauslese, another category of sweet wine, but the unique character of Eiswein remains irreplaceable.

A Glimpse of Hope Amidst Climate Change

Despite the challenges, the 2023 winter offered brief windows of opportunity. Early December 2023 saw temperatures drop enough for harvest in some regions, with a return of conducive conditions in January. Viticulturists like Stephan Herzer of Weingut Herzer in Naumburg and others across regions like Saale-Unstrut, Hessische Bergstrasse, and Ahr seized these moments, gathering their frozen grapes in the frigid early hours.

In Franken, the viticulturist association reports a declining interest in ice wine production, as warmer winters push the necessary freezing temperatures to later months, often only in January or February. The shift is evident: while about 40 wineries could harvest Eiswein grapes in 2012, only seven managed in 2022.

The Process and Prestige of Eiswein

For an authentic Eiswein harvest, grapes must be frozen, requiring temperatures of at least seven degrees below zero Celsius for several hours. These overripe grapes are then collected and pressed while still frozen, resulting in a juice exceptionally sweet, akin to honey. The high sugar content presents fermentation challenges, typically leading to Eisweins with a high natural residual sugar content and a relatively low

alcohol volume, often around 7%.

Despite these challenges, the allure of Eiswein remains strong. Its rarity and unique sweetness balanced with fresh fruit acidity continue to garner international acclaim. As winemakers adapt and persevere, the tradition of German Eiswein, albeit dwindling, endures as a testament to the region's viticultural heritage and the relentless spirit of its producers.