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Ice Wine Faces Uncertain Future as Climate Warms

How Rising Temperatures Are Challenging the World's Ice Wine Producers

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Ice wine, a unique and rare delicacy, is becoming increasingly difficult to produce as the planet warms. Once considered a marvel of winemaking, this liquid gold, crafted from frozen grapes, is now facing an uncertain future. For most winemakers, frost spells disaster, destroying harvests and livelihoods. However, for a select few, it is a blessing that gives birth to a nectar unparalleled in freshness and purity.

Ice wine, or "icewine" in Canada and "eiswein" in Germany, is produced in the coldest wine regions on Earth. These include the shores of Lake Ontario in Canada, the Mosel Valley in Germany, and rare mountainous vineyards where frigid conditions make its creation possible. Made from grapes that are frozen on the vine, the resulting sweet wine boasts a concentrated flavor profile with notes of ripe fruit and honey, counterbalanced by vibrant acidity. Unfortunately, the warming climate is threatening this tradition, making ice wine increasingly rare.

Nicolas Bovard, president of the Cave Mont Blanc cooperative in Morgex, Italy, which lies between France and Switzerland, underscores the challenges. Traditionally, the first frosts in November mark the beginning of ice wine production. However, recent years have seen rain replacing snow, leading to a sharp decline in production. This cooperative, which has been producing ice wine since 1816, has seen its output drop from an average of 3,000 bottles annually to just 500 in 2021. In the last three years, they have been unable to produce any ice wine at all.

Similar difficulties are echoed in the Savoie region of France, where Domaine Perceval has struggled with dwindling harvests over the past five years. Pascal Perceval, the owner and winemaker, notes that the decline in production has forced creative solutions.

Mountainous vineyards, such as those at Cave Mont Blanc, are among the highest in Europe, with some reaching altitudes of 1,200 meters. Here, the local prié blanc grape thrives in extreme conditions. Harvesting takes place at night, when temperatures plummet to -8°C, ensuring the grapes remain frozen. The frozen fruit is then pressed, with the ice staying behind and only the concentrated juice flowing out. This process produces a sweet wine with flavors of ripe apple, apricot, dried fruit, and honey, balanced by a crisp acidity and aged for a year in barrels to enhance its texture.

At Domaine Perceval, Perceval employs an even more daring technique. After pressing, the grape juice is transported to mountain shelters near Mont Blanc, situated at altitudes exceeding 3,000 meters, where nighttime temperatures can reach -40°C. After three days, the ice blocks are brought down and thawed, yielding an exceptionally refined wine. Using jacquère, a grape known for its minerality and acidity, the resulting

wine offers notes of stone fruit and a remarkably long finish. Perceval describes it as a perfect pairing for foie gras or blue cheese, best enjoyed well-chilled to savor each precious drop.

Ice wine remains a testament to winemaking at its most extreme. However, its increasingly precarious existence highlights the growing impact of climate change on even the most resilient of traditions.