

Come out of the cold for Niagara Icewine

Mon Jan 16 2012

Section: Life

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Heidi Fielding distributes glasses of sparkling riesling to a tour group at her family's Fielding Estate Winery. I accept mine gratefully, while taking in the vineyard vista through the Wine Lodge's panoramic windows. It's a little before 11 a.m. and this is the first stop on a winter winery tour in the Twenty Valley.

There are few opportunities in life for socially acceptable drinking before noon but the Niagara Icewine Festival, which kicked off this past weekend, is one of them.

Now in its 17th year, the cold weather ode to the sweet, late-harvest wine continues until Jan. 29, with plenty of opportunities for sampling local food and drink. A \$30 discovery pass will gain you entrance to six of Niagara's 30-plus participating wineries, each of which has devised its own food and wine pairings. And don't worry, if you are someone who doesn't love icewine, there are lots of other options also on offer.

At Fielding, Heidi, who is the daughter-in-law of founders Ken and Marg, leads us downstairs for a tour of the facilities. Among the high vats, we try a 2007 Meritage, followed by the star of the show, a 2010 Vidal Icewine, paired with a spicy pecan tart, the sweetness of the wine bringing out the spice of the dessert.

Icewine is so named because the grapes aren't picked until the first sustained cold snap of at least -8C. The frozen grapes yield one-tenth the liquid of their table wine counterparts, which is why the result is so intense, as well as comparatively costly.

This Vidal, for instance, is \$23.05 for a 375 mL bottle - the standard size for icewine. Sales have been on the rise, Fielding says, noting that people are more likely than they once were to plan meals with a place for icewine.

Following the Fielding tour, we take a quick drive down the road to Malivoire, which is emphasizing the food pairing aspect of the wine experience. Chef Jan Willem Sculpt discusses his icewine-infused chicken with apple, pear and cherry chutney, which is paired with a 2008 Gewürztraminer icewine - the mirrored flavours meant to mutually enhance.

The first round is followed up with a small lot Chardonnay (which smells so much like banana it's amazing), and a small lot Gamay (the same grape variety Beaujolais is made from), both of which are only available for purchase at the winery itself. The vineyards all have stores attached, with tempting displays of their premium wares, as well as nifty accessories. (Malivoire's retail outlet includes a Naked Wine Tasting Party Kit, but don't worry, it's the wine that gets naked, not your houseguests.)

One fun thing we learn is that at Malivoire members of the community who come out to help harvest grapes for icewine - which generally occurs in the middle of the night in temperatures well below zero - get their names listed on the back of the wine bottle, recognition that seems it would make the finger frostbite almost worthwhile.

The last winery of the day is Flat Rock, owned by the super-enthusiastic Ed Madronich, whose passion for his field is contagious. "Wine is the greatest product on Earth," he declares near the start of the tour, and you can tell he means it. Flat Rock specializes in Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Noir.

Madronich tells us his goal is to make the best wine possible, while having fun and innovating along the way. He delights in debunking wine myths "the screw cap is the best enclosure for wine - that debate is over," and challenging conventional wisdom, such as the idea that you should move from white wine to red wine. "No so," he says. "It's from driest to sweetest."

Therefore, we begin with the Estate Pinot Noir, before moving on to the Rusty Shed Chardonnay (named for an outbuilding that came with the property). Up next is The Rouge (a.k.a. The Concoction, a surprisingly tasty mix that changes from batch to batch: "I can't tell you what's in it, because I don't know"), followed by a sweet Riesling, one of their most popular offerings, paired with mulligatawny soup.

And lucky for us there is dessert with dessert wine. Madronich and his staff share homemade icewine marshmallows for toasting over an outdoor fire. Some of the toasted gooey deliciousness ends up on the ground or, less fortunately, in hair, but most lands in the right spot - and the campfire is a wonderful antidote to the -20C weather.

I leave tipsy (I am not pro enough to spit out the wine), smelling of woodsmoke, and half-planning my next visit.

The Niagara Icewine Festival continues to Jan. 29. Visit icewinefestival.com for more information. For a list of participating wineries, visit: niagarawinefestival.com/page/icewine_dp_listings.

More info at: winecountryontario.ca

Travel support provided by Ontario Tourism, ontariotravel.net.