

Niagara's sweet celebration

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The Niagara wine region is already a tourist destination in warmer months, but its annual Niagara Icewine Festival is drawing crowds during chilly January, as well. And it's not just any celebration: When a festival stretches out over three weekends, you know it has arrived.

The big draw is that sweet nectar known as ice wine, and Ontario has become famous for it. The festival, which takes place Jan. 15 to 31, allows guests to partake in all sorts of ways—from galas and food pairings to a foray into a frozen vineyard for some hands-on (and coats-on) experience (for more on ice wine, see page 60).

I attended last year's festival, the 14th annual, for a taste of what it had to offer. Initially, the schedule looked daunting: so much wine, so little time. I soon realized the key was planning.

The first event I attended was the Annual Xerox Icewine Gala at the Fallsview Casino in Niagara Falls, Canada. Since wine country is north of the falls, it seemed an odd choice for the festival's kickoff. But for many of the 700 who attended, the luxurious casino proved ideal. They checked out the slots and gaming tables and then returned to the gala when their luck ran out—or to celebrate with gourmet food and wine from a couple dozen wineries.

The next day, the featured wineries—all fairly close to one other—hosted tastings to show off how their wines go with food. I met up with a friend and off we went in search of the most interesting pairings. The earthy richness of mushroom soup with Vidal ice wine? Spicy Malaysian braised pork with Riesling ice wine? Yes and yes: It was surprising just how well these combos worked.

Next we made our way to Jordan Village, about 15 miles from Niagara-on-the-Lake, for the Twenty Valley Icewine Bar. Jordan is essentially a block of quaint shops, restaurants and the posh Inn on the Twenty. The village had closed off the street and set up a huge bar made of crystal-clear ice blocks, with tables and chairs all made of ice. Guests cozied up to the ice bar for wines from the participating wineries while live jazz played. Considering we were sitting on ice chairs, the hot soups and stews were a welcome part of the day. Actually, between the charming atmosphere and the shops, few people seemed bothered by the frigid temperatures. This was a great way to sample wines in one place.

The next weekend, I attended Peller Estates' Intense Icewine Weekend, billed as "boot camp for bon vivants". The 17 of us who had signed up stayed at White Oaks Resort in Niagara-on-the-Lake. On Saturday morning, Peller's director of Estate Wineries, Mark Torrance, and winemaker Lawrence



Photo provided by CHIMPANZEE COMMUNICATIONS

Interesting variety including galas and hands-on vineyard visits and bars made of ice has helped put the Niagara Icewine Festival on the map.

Buhler whisked us off to the chateau-like winery. Their goal, they explained, was for us to "experience" the winery. It sounded like marketing-speak, but by day's end I understood what they meant.

Our first event was a tutorial and a tasting of six of Peller's ice wines. One thing we learned was that the very term "ice wine" isn't taken lightly; inspectors often attend the harvest so they can test the grapes and ensure they have the minimum sugar content (the "brix") required to qualify as ice wine.

After the tasting, Buhler gave us pruning shears and led us into the vineyard. He trimmed a vine for us, and then it was our turn. A bit nervous, I called Buhler over to get his approval before I cut. By my second vine, I was pruning confidently. We then gathered our trimmings for Peller's chef, who uses them in smoking foods.

Next was a "Vineyard Hand's" lunch. Though pruning in the snow and cold was challenging, I'd be willing to sign up as a vineyard hand if it meant a lunch like this every day: lobster bisque, coq au vin and pear tart tatin accompanied by Peller's exceptional wines.

That afternoon we went into Niagara-on-the-Lake. Similar to Jordan Village the previous weekend, the main street was converted into a pedestrian-only zone featuring ice block bars and food.

Our evening started with a private Ice Cuvée reception with Peller's well-known chef, Jason Parsons, who told us how he uses ice wine in cooking. Then we joined about 60 guests for the Icewinemaker's Dinner. Parsons came out of the kitchen during the seven-course dinner to talk about the meal (he used raisins in the duck confit, for example, because they complemented the Vidal ice wine served with it). The meal was spectacular for its creativity and flavors.

On Sunday morning, Buhler took us to Falk Farm, which grows grapes for Peller. We got a look at the huge French-built picking machines, and we learned that it's critical to press the frozen grapes as soon as possible, which is why they're pressed right at the farm. To round out our tutorial, Buhler served us fresh juice from Riesling, Vidal and Cabernet Franc grapes.

Back at the winery we settled into the private dining room for our final meal, featuring a clever twist on traditional brunch fare: lamb Benedict made with lamb sirloin and ice wine hollandaise, plus French toast with maple whipped cream for dessert.

The weekend's grand finale was a blind tasting where we were put to the test: Could we identify the type of grape and year of five ice wines? The winner walked away with a crystal decanter and other prizes—as if the tasting wasn't reward enough.

