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December is harvest time for ice wine in the Okanagan region of western Canada

By Remy Scalza
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For the grapes, it must be agony.

High above Okanagan Lake, in a frozen corner of western Canada, the wind is whipping through the vineyards in icy blasts. Long after first frost, deep into winter, the grapes here have waited, shivering on the vine. Now, in late December with the temperature falling fast, their polar purgatory is nearly over. It's harvest time in ice wine country.

Ice wine -- exquisite, pricey and deliciously potent -- is made from grapes harvested and pressed at a full 15 degrees below freezing. Every sip betrays its frosty heritage. Ice wine is crisp and invigorating in a way that table wine is not. It's nectar-sweet but never cloying. It's also unfailingly addictive.

Some of the best ice wines in the world are born in Canada's Okanagan region, a mountain valley cut through by glacial lakes and dominated by thousands of acres of vineyards. In the summer, the Okanagan is a natural playground, with mountains, beaches and sunny lakeside wineries drawing legions of travelers from Canada and beyond.

Winter, however, is another story. Wine touring at this time of year offers no opportunities for al fresco dining, no long afternoons spent sipping chardonnay on the patio. But, for the intrepid, Canada's ice wine country holds unexpected rewards: unhurried tours, intimate fireside tastings and access to the coveted snow and slopes of interior British Columbia.

My breath billows out in great plumes as I cross the vineyards at Tantalus, a tiny winery set on a hillside overlooking the Okanagan's namesake lake. "We get the odd moose running through here," says Jane Hatch, who takes care of general operations and leads tours. The setting seems right. Rows of leafless vines dusted with snow stretch in every direction. In the distance, the horizon is cluttered with icy massifs, peaks lost in the clouds.

The wind picks up, turning cheeks rosy and noses red, and we duck inside. Hatch produces a slender bottle, half the size of a normal wine bottle, and empties a few golden ounces into my glass. Ice wine (or [Icewine](#), to use the Canadian trademark) is an eye-catcher, picking up the light in the room like a rare gem. The taste is just as precious and improbable: honey, then citrus, then butterscotch, tussling back and forth over a long, long finish.

"It's risky for wineries to make ice wine," Hatch says, pointing to this year's meager yield, which would fill only a few beer kegs. "You've got birds pecking the daylight out of the grapes left on the vine. The temperatures have to cooperate. And you only get a drop out of each grape."

Add to that the travails of the harvest itself. Grapes are picked in the dead of night, when the vineyard is coldest. Hatch and her crew labored by the light of the moon one recent week, braving temperatures of 20 degrees below freezing to process the precious crop. "It's so cold that the clusters, when you touch them, just shatter off the vine," she says.

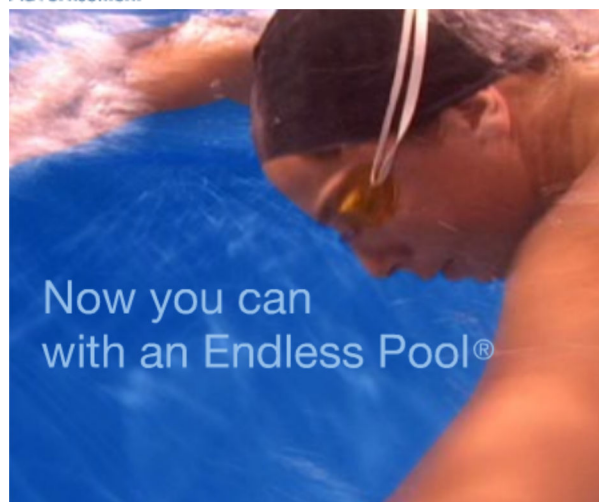
Into the grape outdoors

Fortified with drink, bundled against the cold, we venture back outside. It's snowing now, a few reluctant flakes coaxed from the bone-dry air. The valley itself gets little snowfall. Not so the surrounding mountains. The Okanagan edges up to the Canadian Rockies, with the impressive peaks and finely powdered slopes to prove it. The wilderness here is both raw and, with several major ski resorts in the valley, uniquely accessible.

"You see lynx, coyote, bobcat and fox out there," says 48-year-old mountain guide Ed Kruger, who heads Monashee Adventure Tours.

Kruger -- hulking, good-humored, with a scruff of a ponytail jutting from beneath his balaclava -- is a modern incarnation of the mountain man. We're in his van, zipping higher and higher along alpine roads toward Big

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White, the valley's biggest ski mountain. Its champagne powder is the envy of the downhill world, but Kruger's particular specialty is backcountry snowshoeing.

"I make my own trails," he says. "Basically, I just see some animal tracks and follow."

Of the many ways to experience a mountain in winter -- skiing, boarding, zooming along on a snowmobile -- snowshoeing may well be the most intimate. In powder, the sound is no more than a reverent hush. The pace is human. The forest is still.

But first you need to get the shoes on. The same cold spell thrilling vintners in the valley has made Big White, which sits at more than 5,000 feet, downright arctic. The slopes are devoid of all but the hardest skiers. Struggling with the straps on the snowshoes, my ungloved hands grow numb, then burn. A stiff wind draws tears, instantly freezing my eyelashes together.

My blood begins pumping again, however, once the snowshoes are on. These aren't the wood-and-catgut behemoths of popular imagination. They're ultralight aluminum and almost petite, built to deftly maneuver over the drifts. A few hundred yards from the ski village, we make a sharp turn, plunging off the trail and into fresh, waist-deep powder. Suddenly the woods close in. The wind dies down. Kruger cuts a path deeper and deeper into the trees.

The forest quickly grows exaggerated, a child's vision of winter. Thick stands of arrow-straight spruce shoot skyward, boughs heavy with snow. Deep powder, sun-dappled and gleaming, swaddles everything. Up ahead, there's a quick blur of white on white. A snowshoe hare pauses, crouching low against the snow, all but invisible except for its black, unblinking eye.

Getting closer

But our winter reverie is, of necessity, brief. In the late afternoon the wind picks up and temperatures dip. Water bottles freeze. Backs and knees seize up. We beat a hasty retreat to the van. "Nothing a hot bath and a beer won't fix," Kruger says, cranking the heat and turning back to town.

I opt instead for more ice wine. "How often do you get a chance to taste wines in front of a fireplace?" muses Ingo Grady, who leads tours at Mission Hill Family Estate. At the moment, I'm as thankful for the warmth of the flames as for the libations. We're in the winery's tasting room, whose roaring fire, dark stone walls and cathedral ceilings evoke the inner sanctum of some medieval castle. Grady -- silver-haired, suave, with a hint of a German accent -- carefully fills a row of glasses with golden nectar.

If Dan Brown were to choose a Canadian setting for his next novel, it might well be Mission Hill. Set on a plateau high above Okanagan Lake, the winery is laid out with a meticulous geometry. Its 12-story bell tower, vaulted ceilings and cavernous subterranean barrel room (complete with hidden chamber) all call to mind ancient and mysterious rites and nefarious papal intrigue. This is, however, unlikely: Work on the buildings began only in 1996. In that short time, though, Mission Hill has become perhaps the destination winery in the valley, drawing close to 100,000 visitors last year and raising the bar for Okanagan wines. Ice wines have become a specialty. In 2008, the winery took home world's best ice wine at London's esteemed International Wine Challenge, beating out old-school Euro heavyweights Austria and Germany.

In the tasting room, Grady -- whose official title is director of wine education and who speaks of certain loved wines as of children -- has picked up an amber-colored '06 Riesling. He grows silent, brings the glass to his lips, closes his eyes. After a long pause, he can speak again. "Ice wine is winter's gift to the wine lover," he says. "You're getting closer to the essence of the grape itself."

Back outside, the sun is diving fast for the horizon, draining the valley, the lake and the vineyard of the Canadian winter's scant warmth and light. Raising my collar against the wind, I skirt a row of forlorn grapes. The frozen clusters glow golden in the day's last rays. Soon. Soon. Your long wait is nearly done.

Scalza is a travel and food writer based in Vancouver for the Winter Olympics.

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