

January 2007

American Agriculturist®

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PHOTO BY WALLY KOLEK

ICE WINE VINTNER: Hopkins Vineyard's Jim Baker knows the challenges of making ice wine from grapes and even apple juice.

Icing on the vine

By **JOHN VOGEL**

THE best often comes last as the "icing on the cake." That's also true for ice wines — no matter what fruits they're made from, contends Jim Baker, vineyard manager for Hopkins Vineyard, New Preston, Conn.

Fruit growers who might be contemplating production of ice wine from apples, pears and peaches should know it's a complicated and risky process even for experienced grape growers. In the dark of an early December night, Baker and his pickers harvested a half acre of netted vidal blanc grapes frozen on the vine.

"We wait for temperatures to hit 18 degrees Fahrenheit," notes the vintner. "At the most, we'll get 100 gallons of extruded juice to work with."

Key Points

- Ice wines are difficult to make, but they sell at premium values.
- Freeze-drying is the secret to concentrating flavors, acids and sugars.
- Acceptance of ice wines made from other fruit may be the biggest challenge.

Hopkins is Connecticut's only vineyard to produce and market ice wines. The Litchfield Hills winery also produces red and white wines plus internationally recognized sparkling wines aged three to five years before being bottled, corked, labeled and sold.

Laborious labor of love

While ice wine has a much quicker process, a lot of work goes into making

these sweet dessert wines selling for \$25 to \$50 a bottle. Grapes are left on the vine and covered with netting to prevent bird and deer damage. Freeze-thaw action dehydrates the grapes and concentrates sugars and acids crucial to quality and flavor.

Frozen grapes are handpicked, often at night, and immediately pressed frozen. "The high-sugar juice is fermented slowly — up to a couple of months — at cooler temperatures for a low-alcohol and high-residual-sugar sweet wine," he explains. "In the spring, we filter and bottle it."

"With ice wine, you don't want a high alcohol content; it'll overpower the flavors you're trying to achieve."

Apple ice wine?

Several Northeast fruit growers are

trying their hand at making ice wine from apples and pears. "I've seen it done, but not the traditional way," responds Baker. "The fruit would have to be frozen or dried down in storage."

"I've frozen apple juice and made apple ice wine or apple jack. But the process still involves a lot of risk," he says. "You can also make a sparkling cider from cider or even sparkling wine from ice wine."

"But sparkling wine is far more challenging to make, even in the right market," warns the vintner. "And you still need to have all the equipment."

Then there's the question of consumer acceptance. Would apple ice wine command a premium value worthy of the extra work?

"I don't know," hedges Baker, "but I don't think so."

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