

KOHA FROM SWEET HEAVEN

Most of the dessert wines (or “stickies” as they are frequently referred to) in New Zealand are made in one of two ways: Late harvest, where the grapes have been left on the vines until they start to shrivel and the sugars concentrate resulting in a sweeter wine; or botrytised where the “noble” botrytis rot has affected the grapes causing them to shrivel but also imparting a unique addition to the flavour of the wine.

Another category of sweet wines can only be produced in a very limited number of places. These wines are called Eiswein in Germany and Icewine in Canada and are made by allowing healthy grapes (not shrivelled or affected by botrytis) to freeze on the vine. The water component of the grape freezes, and when the still-frozen grapes are crushed the ice particles stay in the crusher resulting in very sweet, concentrated juice. This is then fermented to produce sweet wines that have very high levels of sugar, but also very high natural acidity. Because of the extreme weather conditions required to achieve this, they are generally very expensive.

Interestingly, though there are vague references dating from Roman times to grapes left to freeze on the vines, there's no evidence that they were then made into wine. The first properly documented Eisweins made were in the 19th century, and then only six vintages were produced. Things only really took off in the 20th century with the invention of the pneumatic press and generator powered lighting that made it easier to hand-harvest the vineyards at night while the grapes were still frozen.

In countries where conditions will not allow grapes to freeze on the vine, a similar effect can be achieved by freezing the harvested grapes before pressing and fermentation. The wines cannot legally be called either Eiswein or Icewine, and they will never rival the real thing, but the examples I've tried are refreshing with their clean acidity and very natural fruit characters. A great option if, like me, you are not really a sweet tooth.

One I tasted recently that I was really impressed with and I would happily have paid quite a bit more money for was Te Mania Koha. It would be perfect with cheese or to balance a very rich dessert.

Te Mania “Koha” Ice Wine 2010 is made from hand picked Riesling grapes and has a nose of exotic florals and a clean green apple note. On the palate are plenty of apple and citrus notes and a clean acidity that carries the considerable residual sugar well.