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# Aiming for sweet success with Ice syrup

The non-alcoholic blend borrows from the success of maple syrup and ice wine

BY MARY WILEY

Ontario Farmer

If Niagara Peninsula grape grower Steve Murdza has his way, menus around the world will soon be featuring a new Canadian icon – Ice Syrup. Made by slowly evaporating freshly-pressed icewine juice until its sugar content and viscosity resemble that of maple syrup, the non-alcoholic product boasts a refreshing balance of sweetness and acidity.

Billed as pure Canadian grape syrup, the non-alcoholic, viscous liquid is positioned in the gourmet category, selling for \$30 a bottle. The Vidal (white) and Cabernet Franc (red) syrups are attractively packaged in 200 mL etched glass bottles, each tucked inside a diamond-shaped box. The box is prominently emblazoned with a maple leaf and features the photo and endorsement signature of renowned Toronto chef Susur Lee.

“Ice Syrup will take its place in the world as a Canadian one of a kind”, predicts the icesyrup.com website.

When asked how he was inspired to make the syrup, Murdza replies, “I’m a food guy - I love food and I love cooking. I’ve always been a fan of icewine, but it’s not necessarily a product you would use every day or for cooking.” He remembers that in the early days of his family growing icewine grapes, it was enough of a novelty that they would marvel at how thick icewine juice is when it drips out of the grape press. The thick, nectar-like properties of the juice led to Murdza deciding, in 2001, that it would be a great idea to create an icewine-inspired syrup product.

Murdza admits that the product development process had some twists and turns. At first, he tried evaporating freshly-pressed icewine juice by boiling it, in a fashion similar to making maple syrup. “This approach did not work. Nothing against prune juice, but that’s what the end product tasted like – not exactly what we had in mind”, observes Murdza.

“When we began working with the Guelph Food Technology Centre (GFTC), we found a more direct route to our desired end product. By using a slow evaporator, we were able to find a



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way to keep the intense flavour profile of icewine and maintain the rich colour of the original juice. Both the sugar and acid content of the Ice Syrup are concentrated, making it ideal for cooking. A tablespoon here and there can really enhance the flavours in a dish.”

Murdza’s family has been growing grapes in the St. Davids area since the early days of hybrid and vitis vinifera grapes being planted in Ontario. “At

one time, my father had two hundred acres of wine grapes on the go”, Steve notes, explaining that they were one of the first families to grow higher-quality wine grapes. Today, Murdza has a ten-acre vineyard, so he plans to buy icewine juice from other growers as the market for Ice Syrup grows.

And the market certainly could grow. “We are hoping this product will help to pick up where icewine export sales

have trailed off”, he notes. “As a food product, we see it being easier to market than wine. We believe Europeans will readily recognize the grape varieties in the syrups, and the non-alcoholic aspect will help to boost sales in the Middle East.”

Right now Ice Syrup is in the pilot to commercial stage, with processing still happening at the GFTC. They have 3,400 bottles from the 2008 icewine vintage, with a plan to expand production to 40,000 bottles from the 2009 crop. In the near future, Murdza and his business partners hope to be processing their syrups in a food grade facility in Niagara.

“The Canadian maple syrup market is around 25 million Litres a year. Current production of icewine is about 1.5 million Litres. If Ice Syrup could capture even half of the market volume that maple syrup has achieved, it could really make a difference for Niagara’s grape growers”, Murdza points out.

To illustrate what he sees ahead for his new product, he points to the example of balsamic vinegar, first introduced to the U.S. market in the late 1970’s. “Sales of balsamic in North America began with two thousand cases coming in a container load of products from Italy. Today, the global market for balsamic is more than two hundred million bottles a year, and it’s a ‘go-to’ product. We see the same type of opportunity for Ice Syrup if it’s supported and it goes well.”

When asked how he likes to use Ice Syrup in cooking, Murdza recommends brushing pork tenderloin with a mixture of two tablespoons each of Ice Syrup and olive oil just before placing the meat on the grill. “The syrup adds complexity to any dish”, notes Murdza. “It’s not so strong that it takes over; rather its unique balance of sweetness and acidity provides a very interesting layer of flavour”, he adds, fondly remembering the results when Susur Lee drizzled Ice Syrup over a cooked, chili-glazed Ontario bosc pear garnished with blue cheese and sweet cream.

Ice Syrup is available in several local winery retail stores, is a featured ingredient in Niagara Falls’ Criveller chocolate truffles, and is on the shelves in Toronto Chef Mark McEwan’s new gourmet food store. It certainly looks as though Steve Murdza’s sweet dreams are beginning to come true.