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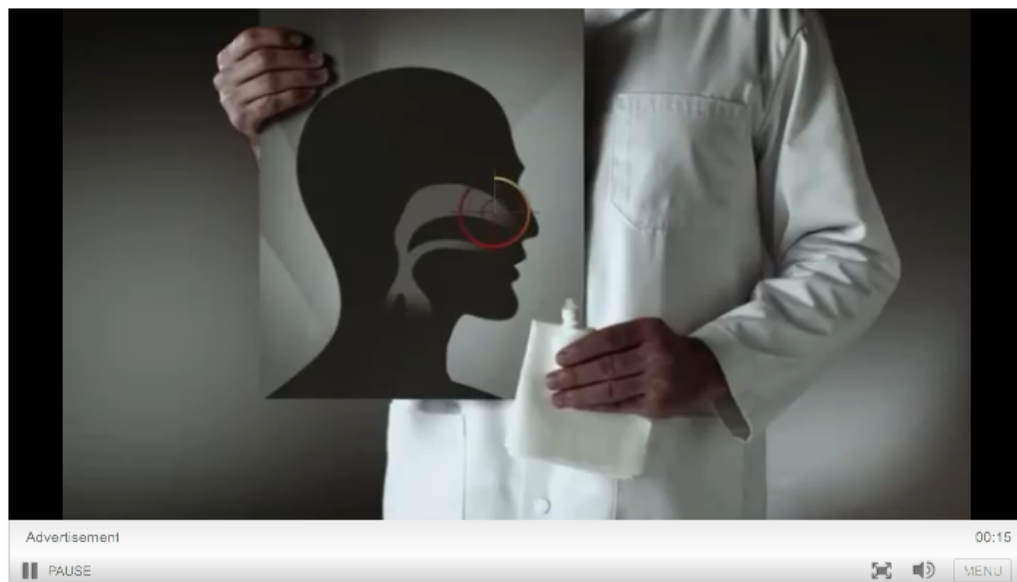
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Niagara vineyards take a beating after brutal winter



10437 views

Katie Jones

Digital Reporter

Friday, April 10, 2015, 1:21 PM - Though the latest winter season is technically behind us, the effects of freezing temperatures have taken their toll on fragile grapevines across southern Ontario.

After a season of record-breaking cold, grape growers and wineries in the Niagara region are struggling to determine just how bad the 'winter kill' in the vineyards will be this year.

Yet the most they can do right now is wait.

Grape varieties used to produce wines in Niagara are sensitive to extreme heat and cold, and will likely sustain serious damage once temperatures dip to around 15 below.

In the first few weeks of spring, vines are typically still in a state of hibernation. "The vines don't start growing until temperatures reach around 10 degrees Celsius at night," explains third-generation grape grower Daniel Lenko, and winemaker of Daniel Lenko Estate Winery in Beamsville, Ontario.

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While there are early signs of significant loss to this year's crop, the extent of the damage may not be fully revealed until the summer, when the vines begin to swell and produce buds.



Grape vines along the shores of Lake Ontario in Beasmville, Ontario

As any Ontario grape grower knows, contending with intense cold during the winter months is par for the course. Preparation is the greatest defense against the inevitable chill that each winter season brings -- especially for vines still recovering from the winter of 2013-2014.

"Portions of the vineyard have taken a beating with the severe cold, and some vine damage is assured," said Dr. Marc P. Bradshaw, winemaker at Strewin Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake. "But all in all we have seen better survival than initially thought."

Many vineyards throughout Niagara rely on the use of wind machines in order to prevent frosty air from settling over the vines when subzero temperatures strike overnight. These machines are helpful, but noisy and costly to operate.

VineAlert, a program that measures the cold hardiness of Ontario grapevines, was recently reinstituted by The Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. It acts as a cold weather warning system for local growers, and indicates when the wind machines should be turned on. A recent economic study found that VineAlert has helped growers save as much as \$2.3 million in fuel costs, by only using their wind machines at the appropriate times.

However, some vineyards are able to rely on geography, rather than technology, when it comes to safekeeping as many plants as possible.



Rick VanSickle
@rickwine

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Another cruel winter for grapes in Ont. New bud survival rates for Niagara now posted: bit.ly/1GeOKDG

11:19 AM - 21 Feb 2015 · St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

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The Niagara wine region is nestled between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. These bodies of water help to moderate temperatures throughout the year. The flow of air from water surfaces to the Niagara Escarpment and back again prevent cold air from settling over the area for too long. A few kilometres can be critical, as temperatures can vary by several degrees during the winter months from one vineyard to another.

So what impact will the winter damage have on this year's vintage of Niagara wines?

Grape varieties that appear to have suffered the most damage this year include Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot, according to the Grape Growers of Ontario website.

The Chardonnay fields at Lenko's winery in Beamsville have been diminished by about 50 per cent, while only 20 per cent of red grapevines like Merlot and Cabernet Franc have survived.

"It will be a light crop and light production year," says Lenko, who annually produces an average of 3,000 cases of wine. "We'll focus on working with hardier varieties this year, rather than damaged reds, such as Merlot and the Cabernet."

Thankfully many growers learned from last year's equally harsh winter.

"With uncertainty of the previous year's cold winter, we stocked up like a hibernating bear last crush," said Bradshaw. "So fingers crossed we will ride out the potential short crop year upon us."

Local wine aficionados will likely have their fingers crossed as well.

The Niagara region is home to more than 80 wineries, that collectively produce an average of 2 millions cases of wine per year. Ontario's grape and wine sector generates about \$3.3 billion CAN each year.



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As for Canada's other major wine-producing region, the status of vineyards in British Columbia is in a similar state of unease – but for an adverse reason.

"In contrast to the east with the winter that did not want to end, here in B.C. it seemed that winter ended in January," writes Manfred Freese, President of the British Columbia Grapegrowers Association. "Our concern now is for a much earlier than usual grapevine bud-burst, with the dangers posed by a sudden April frost (which would kill the buds)."

Sources: VQA Ontario | Brock University | Grape Growers of Ontario

SEE BELOW: Love Icewine? Than you have to love the weather!

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