

# In the Vineyard: Winter

1-15-2015

Now that we're deep into winter, you may wonder what's going on in the vineyard.

Here in Wisconsin, we're used to cold winters, but last January was especially rough. We and [our vines](#) can handle temperatures well below zero, but what set last winter apart was how long the very cold weather lasted.

At a certain point, cold like last year's can affect even the most cold-hardy grapevines. During deep, prolonged cold spells, the shoots of the vines—which is where the buds bloom and eventually bear grapes—can dry out. This cuts off nutrients that come up from the grapevine's roots to help the buds develop. Without sufficient nutrition, and with prolonged exposure to extreme cold, the buds can die. Fewer buds means fewer bunches of grapes will grow, which means a smaller crop. In our vineyard, the vines themselves were not killed, which is exactly why we grow grapes bred for their winter-hardiness.

The vines were, in fact, mostly unharmed, but we did experience some bud loss. In a typical season, we can expect about 5-10% bud loss, but this past year we lost about 40-50% of the buds overall. This means that on a given vine, which has around 40 potentially fruit-bearing buds, most of the primary buds were damaged and could not bear fruit. Secondary and tertiary buds could still bear fruit if they were undamaged, but the yield from non-primary buds is smaller.

Of the grapes affected, the French-American hybrid Marechal Foch fared the best of all grape varieties we grow here, with only 10-20% bud loss. Our oldest vines, which are the 40-year-old Foch for our [Domaine Reserve wine](#), were minimally affected; winter-hardiness seems to improve with age, just like our Domaine Reserve. We also noticed that wind exposure made a difference; the fields that were shielded from the wind by hills and trees suffered less damage than flatter, more open fields. Winemaker Philippe noted that "the white grapes actually suffered the most and we ended up harvesting 30 to 40% of normal." Fortunately, this is only a temporary setback; we expect the crop to bounce back in the future.

The white grape bud loss directly affected two of our estate-grown wines made from La Crosse and St. Pepin grapes: [Eagle White](#) and [Ice Wine](#). This year, [Eagle White](#) is of excellent quality, but in especially limited supply; we expect it to sell out before the end of this month. We will not release a new Ice Wine this year. (The 2013 vintage of Ice Wine—[released in October 2014](#)—is still available and in good supply.)

The decision not to make a 2014 Ice Wine, which we would have harvested this past December, was made with the best interests of the vineyard in mind. [When we make Ice Wine](#), we leave

the grapes on the vines until they freeze solid. As the vines go through the seasons and into winter, they become more brittle, and so leaving grapes on them so late into fall can put extra strain on them. To give the vines a break after last year's deep freeze, we did not leave any St. Pepin grapes on the vines after harvest; [they were all picked](#) and used in making the 2014 vintage of our wines. As Philippe mentioned in a recent [interview with local TV station WISC](#), not having a 2014 Ice Wine will affect this year's bottom line because it is one less product we can sell. We are hopeful, however, that things will return to normal in the next few years.

We are unfortunately not alone in being affected by nasty winters. Wine is an agricultural product, all of which—from apples to grains to livestock—feel the effects of this weather. We have appreciated the concern our customers have expressed, and we are optimistic that the 2014 vintage will be of high quality. As long as this year's winter does not take a turn to be like last year's, we're in good shape moving into the 2015 growing season.