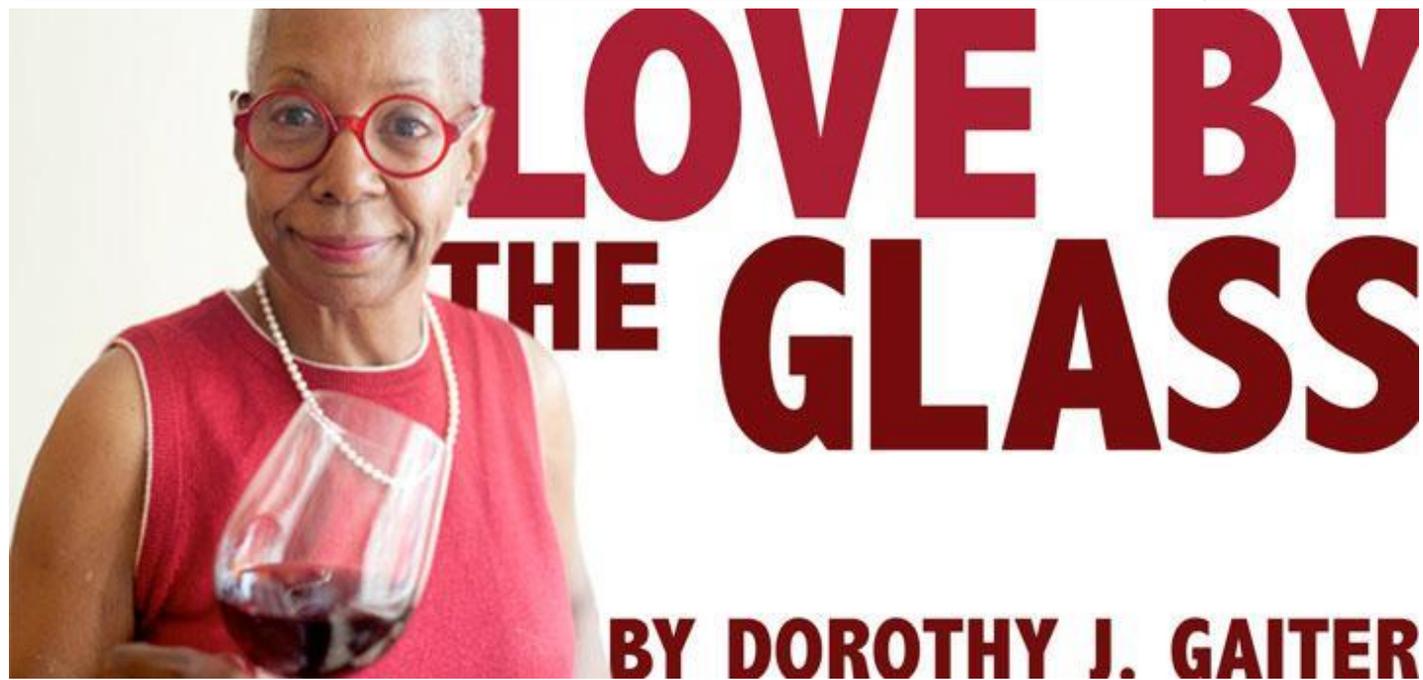


# WANT TO BE AHEAD OF A TREND? REMEMBER THIS: CABERNET FRANC

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We found ourselves in California earlier this month for a few days, a frustratingly short time to visit such a wonderful place, but it was long enough to convince us that Cabernet Franc seems to be having a moment.

The grape has long been used in blends here and in Bordeaux, usually with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. As a single-variety wine like Chinon, the friendly red of the Loire, it's been a passion project off and on for a few brave winemakers here and there in the U.S. Whitecliff Vineyard & Winery in the Hudson Valley of New York, for instance, made a good one, and we think it's the best grape of Long Island, not Merlot.

After an explosion of them into the market a decade ago, single-variety labeled Cabernet Franc became more scarce, retreating once again into blends. It is a difficult grape, and can rebel if not grown in the right mineral-rich soils or handled with the closest attention. But everywhere we looked in San Francisco and in Napa Valley, on restaurant and wine bars' wine lists and at wineries, there it was, varietal Cabernet Franc.

If you haven't had a Cabernet Franc, it's softer and lighter than Cabernet Sauvignon, which DNA testing more than a decade ago discovered was the result of a cross of Cabernet Franc with Sauvignon Blanc. Cabernet Franc has prominent acidity, blackberries and strawberries and sometimes a dash of green olives or bell peppers and violets. I love the graphite, and, yes, it can smell like pencil shavings. When done not that well, it can have a flatness to it, which I guess makes it good for blending. The best ones make me immediately think of a black-and-blue steak, which grosses John out big time!

Cabernet Franc is having a great moment in Tuscany, too, of all places, where at Tenuta di Trinoro, in the remote Orcia Valley, an iconoclastic winemaker, Andrea Franchetti, is bottling single-vineyard, single-variety Cabernet Franc wines. There are three, from 2014, in this first release of a series. The three, from different elevations and sites or campi in the valley are Campo di Tenaglia, Campo di Camagi and Campo di Magnacosta. This last one was first produced in 2011. The wines bear the IGT Rosso Toscana designation. Franchetti made 1,500 bottles of each of the three and each sells for \$120.



Franchetti enjoys a certain celebrity. Here's how Jancis Robinson described him years ago: "There is something endearingly frank about a wine producer who describes his life pre wine production thus: 'I had a restaurant in Rome, distributed Italian wines in New York from '82 to '86 and before that I was in a beautiful tunnel of dope. I can't remember exactly when."

The biography that came along with his wines says that his American mother is from a wealthy South Carolina textile-making family, and that his uncle was the late artist Cy Twombly. After some digging, I discovered his mother's name, Anne Milliken (serious wealth), and his father's, Baron Mario Franchetti, who has been described as "dashing." After digging some more, I discovered that Twombly had married the sister of his patron, Baron Giorgio Franchetti. The Franchettis have for centuries been influential patrons of the arts, merchants, explorers, artists and musicians.

So Andrea Franchetti (left) has deep pockets, and his wines show it. He's lavished all sorts of attention on them, no doubt some of it advice from his friends Jean Luc Thunevin of Château Valandraud in St. Emilion and Peter Sisseck of Dominio de Pingus, two other head-strong vintners who are charging ahead where others have not gone before.

Robinson wrote of Franchetti, "There are roundabout connections with the families who own Cinzano and Montalcino wine producers Argiano and Col d'Orcia which presumably helped draw him to his very particular corner of central Italy, in sheep country which had not been planted with vines for a century."

The Orcia Valley is southeast of Siena, and its agricultural landscapes are on a Unesco World Heritage list. The Tenuta di Trinoro winery, at the base of a mountain, is blessed with a wide diversity of soils and climates. A winemaker with an experimental bent, Franchetti brought cuttings of Cabernet Franc, his favorite grape, from Pomerol and set about figuring out where they grew best and produced distinctive expressions of their distinctive locations. It has taken 20 years of study and experimentation to produce the wines in the 2014 series.

Although the wines are all priced the same, they couldn't be more different, which is to be expected given their different terroirs. The Magnacosta is from a gravelly plot on the valley's floor, and like vineyards can be on other valley floors, it was a little wan. Raspberries with a squirt of lime, it got much better with time and air. Of the three at first, it was the simplest, and was 15% alcohol while the other two were 14.5%. After being open for a full week, it impressed the heck out of us and made us sorry we had finished the other two after they'd been open for only two days. Terrific wine.

The Tenaglia, from a parcel made of "crumbled limestone on a slope facing the sunset" at high altitude, the label says, had that pencil shavings marker on the nose and was dark and spicy with lots of acidity and a bit of vanilla. It was intense and sharp, and over time showed appealing minerality, with herbs and green olives.

The Camagi, the label says, is from a parcel where there had been a vineyard a long time ago, growing on "broken quartz and limestone...in a thin layer of soil." It was by far our favorite, possessing a purity that reminded us of eau du vie with color and without the takes-your-breath-away alcohol. A beautifully balanced, black, intense wine. Our notes said, "It is black as night and has serious weight and density. Black berries, black cherries, minerals. This one is whole." John said, "It has structure. You can taste it," and with his hands he indicated levels, stratifications. "Even a more-fulfilling nose. All about the fruit. Big and elegant." If your father or father-in-law loves wine, this would be an awesome present for Father's Day. (T. Edward Wines; [vinifranchetti.com/distributors](http://vinifranchetti.com/distributors) for a full list.)

My larger point is this: You should find a Cabernet Franc and celebrate its return. Winemakers are having fun with it again!