



RED SHIFT: FRANC IS FINALLY SHEDDING ITS REPUTATION FOR GREEN AND STALKY FLAVOURS

A Franc exchange

Cabernet Franc isn't the most famous grape from the Cabernet family, but it's starting to catch on for use in single varietal wines. [Sarah Ahmed](#) takes a look at Cabernet Sauvignon's big daddy.

As soap opera fans well know, DNA tests can produce surprising results. In 1997, the University of California at Davis discovered that Bordeaux's Cabernet Sauvignon was none other than the lovechild of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc.

Apparently Cabernet Sauvignon resulted from a spontaneous fling between neighbouring vines, such are the sordid origins of this famous variety. Cabernet Franc, on the other hand, claims an ancient and noble lineage. It is thought to be one of the oldest descendants of Biturca, a grape that the Romans brought to Bordeaux during the first century.

However, Cabernet Franc has long been eclipsed by its child prodigy Cabernet Sauvignon, whose smaller, thicker-skinned berries give greater depth of colour and a more imposing structure to wine. Typically relegated to the junior partner in a blend with Cabernet Sauvignon and/or Merlot, it has been difficult for Cabernet Franc to achieve a profile in these varietal conscious times. Matters are not helped by its reputation for green, stalky flavours – a function of its vigour, and also a tendency

to plant it in cooler regions where the later-ripening Cabernet Sauvignon may not ripen at all.

This summer, the Loire Valley wine industry hosted the world's first international Cabernet Franc tasting, Les Rendez-Vous de Fontevraud, putting the spotlight on single varietal Cabernet Franc wines. Entries from South Africa, Hungary, the United States, Italy, Australia and Hong Kong in addition to France demonstrated that even in warmer regions, which favour Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc has some passionate proponents. If these regions can reliably ripen the more modish Cabernet Sauvignon, why bother with Cabernet Franc at all?

Sam Harrop MW, a speaker at the Rendez-Vous, says: "As more red wines are drunk without food, we will see greater acceptance of lighter reds without the sweet, rich mid-palate and chunky tannins so in vogue today." For him, Cabernet Franc's strength is that it can fit into both camps because of its perfume and lower extract than Cabernet Sauvignon. So, just maybe, the other Cabernet's time has come. ►

Home turf

France has the lion's share of the world's Cabernet Franc (about 39,000ha compared with about 16,000ha elsewhere). Bordeaux, although it has the most plantings (17,280ha), blends it with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. The attraction is prosaic: Cabernet Franc ripens a week or two earlier than Cabernet Sauvignon, making it a useful commodity in poor vintages. This, combined with the freshness and structure it brings to Merlot-dominated wines, explains its popularity on Bordeaux's cooler Right Bank. Another reason is climate change. Philippe Bardet, of Châteaux Picoron and Val d'Or, is increasing Cabernet Franc plantings because global warming means it is ripening more consistently while Merlot is often becoming too alcoholic.

A handful of Bordeaux's most famous Right Bank wines, notably Cheval Blanc and Ausone, even give it a lead role over Merlot. Pre-eminent Bordeaux consultant Stephane Derenoncourt explains Cabernet Franc is "marvellous" on St Emilion's limestone, showing iris, spicy pepper, wild strawberry and liquorice. These wines are proof positive of Cabernet Franc's potential when accorded due respect.

Introduced further north in the 11th century, the Loire boasts the second highest plantings of Cabernet Franc (16,431ha). Its cooler climate favours the earlier ripening Cabernet Franc over Cabernet Sauvignon, and single varietal wines are the norm. For many years, leading Loire producers working with low, riper yields have realised its potential for ageworthy, intensely perfumed and fruity elegant wines. The results of the Rendez-Vous reflect the experience borne out of this dedication to Cabernet Franc – 28 of the 32 "Plus Grandes Expressions de Cabernet Franc" came from the Loire.



You need to work twice as hard to be on par with more popular varieties, and three times harder to get something special

Belt and braces

Nonetheless, Loire Cabernet Franc's reputation is for lightweight, stinky wines with green tannins. Some claim this reflects "typicity," a view which Loire courtier Charles Sydney lambasts for "condemning the region to a slow death". Fortunately the desire to improve exports is bringing change. René-Louis David, Interloire's Secrétaire-Général, says: "There is now a strong qualitative trend underpinned by better viticultural practices." Sydney confirms: "Long pruning, de-budding and de-leafing reduces yields giving healthier grapes, which can be left to ripen for longer without fear of disease even in rainy years like 2004. Producers can then push the envelope in the winery, so instead of green, angular tannins one sees intensely fruity wines with higher alcohol levels and more sucrosity of tannins."

David says the exceptional 2003 vintage has spurred growers proactively to seek better expression of fruit every year rather than just relying on the weather to deliver. To that end, Interloire hired Harrop, formerly a Marks & Spencer's buyer, to help educate growers about producing consistently ripe, fruitier Cabernet Franc. Belt and braces techniques which help reduce green flavours and highlight fruit include de-stemming, cold macerating only ripe fruit, shorter macerations, fruitier yeast strains and regulating temperatures according to ripeness (low to conserve ripe fruit, higher to blow off green notes in less ripe fruit). Twenty experimental wines were shown at the Rendez-Vous, and green notes were marked by their absence.

Global diaspora

With about 7,000ha, Friuli, Trentino and the Veneto in northeast Italy have the world's only substantial Cabernet Franc plantings outside France, though plantings are confused with another grape, Carmenère. Early ripening and winter hardiness have contributed to its popularity. Most sells as table wine in local taverns. Further east, Hungary has a long qualitative tradition of Cabernet Franc. Two wines from its Villány region were the only non-French wines to be awarded "Plus Grandes Expressions de Cabernet Franc" status at the Rendez-Vous.

With the exception of the United States (1,750ha), New World plantings are typically under 1,000ha. Of this, most ends up in Bordeaux-style blends. Single varietal wines are exceptional and, even then, sometimes made only in stellar vintages. South African Cabernet Franc specialist Bruwer Raats attributes this to Cabernet Franc's need for absolute commitment in the vineyard: "You need to work twice as hard to be on par with more popular varieties, and three times harder to get something special." Brett Jackson, of Valdivieso in Chile, explains: "If the site is very vigorous, the natural greenish characters of Cabernet Franc can easily become very overpowering, and the tannins very aggressive." Research by Chilean winery Loma Larga suggests that Cabernet Franc needs at least

CAB CONFAB:
FONTEVRAUD ABBEY
HOSTED THE TASTING
AND CONFERENCE



3,000 hours over 10°C from October to harvest date to mature fully. It follows that even in warmer countries producers must site select and prune ruthlessly to guarantee even ripening and avoid stinky flavours – both Raats and Colin Best of Leabrook Estate, Australia, sacrifice almost 30-40 per cent of their crop. In New Zealand, Kim Crawford also hand plucks leaves to expose 60 to 70 per cent of the fruit.

So what is the upside of Cabernet Franc for New World countries? First and foremost, it's about elegance. Raats says: "With its finer tannin structure and earlier ripening at lower sugars, Cabernet Franc has the right DNA to be elegant, unlike Cabernet Sauvignon or Shiraz." Delia Viader in California started Viader's single varietal Cabernet Franc as a "second" ready-to-drink-now alternative to her Bordeaux blend, valuing its "silky finish and floral notes". In the winery, gentle handling is de rigueur.

Raats adds that Cabernet Franc's difficult reputation is ultimately advantageous because, unsuited to big brands, "there are fewer wines and these are known for quality not quantity". Even in South America, which makes reliably good big brands with other Bordeaux varieties, Cabernet Franc's point of difference is attracting a niche following among boutique producers like Morandé and Odfjell in Chile, who say it is perfect for their "quest for something different and unique".

The best of Cabernet France: France v the world

So plantings of Cabernet Franc are spreading far beyond the grape's spiritual home in the Loire. But how do the wines from all these regions match up?

The Loire

Typified by its vibrant crimson to purple hue, floral nose and fresh palate with intense red fruits and a hint of leafiness, most Loire Cabernet Franc is unoaked. Improved ripening is producing more oaked wines, which show darker black cherry fruits.

Diverse terroir has a stylistic impact for the five principal appellations: Chinon, Bourgueil and St-Nicolas de Bourgueil in Touraine, and Saumur-Champigny and Anjou in Anjou-Saumur. In Touraine, limestone and clay soils make for perfumed, structured, ageworthy wines while gravel produces lighter styles.

In Saumur-Champigny, limestone gives finely honed, expressive wines with supple tannins, succulent fruit and cinnamon spice. Anjou's schistous soils tend towards firmer tannins, and wines labelled Anjou-Villages and especially Anjou-Villages Brissac can show dense black fruits, lead pencil and liquorice:

Charles Joguet Chinon Les Varennes du Grand Clos 2004 – a firmly structured wine whose sweet, delicately spicy core of morello cherry mingles with violets.

Domaine de la Butte Bourgueil Le Haut de la Butte 2004 – an iron fist in a velvet glove: earthy raspberry and ripe black cherry fruit undercut by a mineral seam; a powerful yet elegant keeper.

Domaine de la Cotelleraie St-Nicolas de Bourgueil Cuvée Le Vu Jaumier 2004 – sumptuous concentration of spicy raspberry and black cherry with velvety tannins and a lick of vanilla surrounding a mineral core; impressive freshness to balance. ►

CABERNET FRANC

Domaine des Roches Neuves Saumur-Champigny Marginale 2004 – great depth of succulent black cherry fruit with violet top notes and a mineral seam enhancing a long, fine, focused finish.

Château La Varière Anjou-Villages Brissac Cuvée Jacques Beaujeu 2003 – black cherry, clove, lead pencil and liquorice with a firm tannic backbone make for a great food wine.

South of France

Single varietal Cabernet Francs are rare, but clay soils and an excellent microclimate produce this award-winning wine:

Baronnie de Bourgade Les 3 Poules, VDP des Côtes de Thongue 2005 – unashamedly fruity and supple with baked plum, sweet black cherry, raspberry, spice, mocha and a touch of lead pencil.

Italy

Describing most wines from Friuli-Venezia Giulia and the Veneto as “weedy and unripe”, Liberty Wines’ David Gleave prefers Cabernet Franc from Bolgheri and Trinoro in Tuscany: “It takes on ripe, plummy characters rather than unripe green and herbaceous characters.”

Andrea Franchetti at Tenuta di Trinoro agrees. His sumptuously textured Cabernet Franc usually goes into a blend, Le Cupole. It reflects harvesting as late as the end of November from high-density plantings on gravelly clay and limestone soils at high altitude. In 2000, he bottled magnums of a magnificent, still youthful, single-varietal wine:

La Tunella, Colli Orientali del Friuli 2004 – light to medium bodied with red cherry, earthy raspberry and herbal/tobacco notes; fresh acidity.

Poggio al Tesoro ‘W’, IGT Toscana 2004 – a rich core of fleshy sweet raspberry and cherry fruit with super-ripe tannins, spice and toast; long, persistent finish.

Hungary

Winemaker Franz Reinhard Weninger says Villány’s Mediterranean climate means, “Cabernet Franc can stand alone – its strong fruit is more complex than Cabernet Sauvignon, creating an elegant wine while still having a big ageing potential.”

Weninger-Gere Cabernet Franc, Villány 2003 – full-bodied, rich wine with plum, fruitcake, liquorice and oak; ripe, structured tannins.

Malatinszky Kuria Cabernet Franc, Villány 2003 – powerfully structured and concentrated with succulent plum, blackberry and cherry, mineral, mocha and tobacco notes.

South Africa

The best wines show sweet red and black fruit, spice, dried herbs and silky soft tannins:

Raats Cabernet Franc, Stellenbosch 2004 – lifted cherry notes on the nose. Lovely purity of ripe cherry, damson and plum fruit spiked with cinnamon. There is a silky texture to its elegant frame.

Neethlingshof Lord Neethling Cabernet Franc, Stellenbosch 2002 – broader-brush style with damsons, spice, liquorice and toast; good persistence.

Chile

Chile’s long hang times produce rich, full-bodied wines with a sweet, slightly vegetal palate. Oaked styles prevail with American oak (often combined with French) sweetening the middle palate:

Valdivieso Single Vineyard Reserve Cabernet Franc, Rapel 2003 – smooth, rich, ripe palate of red and black cherry, raspberry and mocha with a hint of cinnamon and green capsicum.

Loma Larga BI, Casablanca 2005 – cool climate freshness and elegance: vibrant crimson, perfumed with cherry, crushed raspberry and mint.

Argentina

Argentinean Cabernet Franc possesses more tannic backbone than those from neighbouring Chile:

Humberto Canale Black River Reserve Cabernet Franc 2003 – powerfully built yet fresh, cool climate Patagonian wine with blackcurrant, blackberry, violets and cedar.

Uruguay

A similar climate and soil to Bordeaux gives elegant, intense wines with red fruits:

Bodegas Castillo Viejo CataMayor Family Reserve Cabernet Franc, San José 2004 – violets, succulent red cherry and spicy French oak; poised, elegant frame with fine-grained tannins.

California

Elegant and blockbuster styles co-exist, the latter usually featuring sweeter American oak:

Viader Dare, Napa Valley 2003 – floral, elegant wine with ripe raspberry, cherry and dried herbs; svelte tannins, with well-integrated French oak.

Ironstone Vineyards Cabernet Franc, California 2003 – exuberant plum and cherry fruit with lashings of vanilla; flavoursome.

Australia

In Adelaide Hills’ vintage-sensitive cool climate, Colin Best of Leabrook Estate describes his wine’s core characteristic as “freshness with lifted spice characters”. At Chalk Hill, McLaren Vale’s warmer climate facilitates full physiological ripeness, producing fruit-led wines:

Leabrook Estate Cabernet Franc 2004 – aromatic nose with liquorice and mint; good intensity of red and black berry fruits with liquorice and subtle spicy oak flavours.

Chalk Hill The Procrastinator 2005 – unwooded, ripe, juicy, aromatic wine with damson, black cherry and spice.

New Zealand

Cool climate fresh, red-fruited, menthol wines:

Kim Crawford Cabernet Franc 2004 – raspberries and strawberries with a delicate note of mint and lively acidity.

Murdoch James Estate Blue Rock 2003 – more extracted, its firm tannic frame is fleshed out with black cherry, raspberry and pomegranate. **W&S**

