

AT THE BAR cabernet franc



CABERNET FRANC

The Loire darling and Bordeaux stepchild plants new roots.

/// BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN



Cabernet franc has its friends and its enemies. Before he became a vintner, Robert Sinskey didn't know he was drinking cabernet franc when he sipped French wine labeled Bordeaux, Chinon or Bourgueil. His first encounters with American-made cabernet franc were not pleasant. "They tasted like high-alcohol canned green beans—a weird mix of ripe and unripe characteristics," says the owner of Robert Sinskey Vineyards, Napa, California.

Later, Sinskey was offered cabernet franc grapes from Carneros at the cooler southern end of Napa, and reluctantly vinified them. He was pleasantly surprised by the quality. Most American cabernet franc, he realized, was grown in warmer regions where the grapes "sugared up" before they developed flavor, causing the wine to lose natural acidity and become too alcoholic.

As vintners such as Sinskey brought cabernet franc into balance, they continued to use the wine as a blender. Now wineries more frequently sell it as a single varietal. From France to California, Washington and beyond, consumers are meeting up with cabernet franc in restaurants and tasting rooms.

The tasting notes from California cabernet francs can read like a tasting menu. Consider the description on Wente Vineyards 2012 Small Lot Cabernet Franc: Aromas of chocolate, mint and coffee; flavors of plum, chocolate and black olive. It's tempting enough to pair with the grilled grass-fed beef burger with housemade hot sauce, blue cheese and bourbon pickles at The Restaurant at Wente Vineyards, Livermore, California.

The varietal thrives elsewhere in Livermore Valley. At Bent Creek Winery, co-owner Tom Heineman sees cabernet franc sell out quicker than other wines in the tasting room. Cabernet franc is also the top tasting-room seller at Auburn James in Danville. "People who find cabernet sauvignon too big gravitate to cabernet franc with its more moderate body, says co-owner Matt Ospeck. "People like the adventure of finding a new varietal that pairs with pasta or pizza. Priced below our cabernet sauvignon, it's a more economical choice."

Cabernet franc's French roots

The grape most likely originated in Southwest France in the Libournais region of Bordeaux and is a parent of cabernet sauvignon. Cabernet franc's reputation as the third most important blending wine in Bordeaux belies its composition of only 10% of Bordeaux vineyards.

"Cabernet franc is rarely the dominant variety in Bordeaux wines, but adds a perfumed elegance and freshness to blends," says Mary Gorman, master of wine and market adviser to the Bordeaux Wine Council. "Yet the grape does play a leading role in Cheval Blanc and Château Ausone."

A few Bordeaux producers are experimenting with single varietal offerings. Mark Hellyer, owner of Chateau Civrac in the Côtes de Bourg on the Right Bank, recently released a single varietal cabernet franc not yet available in the U.S. Hellyer believes this is the first cabernet franc bottling in his appellation. Like many vintners in the U.S., Italy and beyond, he mistook cabernet franc for merlot vines, but now finds a growing market for the wine.

The Loire Valley may be best-known for chenin blanc and sancerre, but cabernet franc was planted in the central or "middle" area along the Loire River by the 14th century. Renaissance epicurean author François Rabelais extolled the cabernet franc wines from Chinon near his hometown.

The Loire River moderates the climate for cabernet franc with enough sun and not-too-cold winters. As an earlier ripening grape with thinner skin than cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc grapes thrived in the area's soils of schist and flinty Senonian clay. Anjou Rouge, Chinon, Saumur Rouge, Saumur Champigny and Bourgueil are the best-known Loire cabernet franc wines.

Dan Davis, wine director at Commander's Palace and Café Adelaide, New Orleans, notes that Loire cabernet franc shows the same lovely fruits as its New World cousins. But here, he adds, "The fruit is framed with delicate floral notes, tobacco and an earthy sense of place—they are more soulful. When I explain the French term "terroir" to someone who is just beginning to learn about wine, I open a Loire Valley cabernet franc as an example."

Patrick Baudouin, owner of Domaine Patrick Baudouin in the Anjou region, sees production of cabernet franc increasing. He produces a complex Anjou Rouge La Fresnaye. Vintner Alexandre

CABERNET FRANC: BEYOND FRANCE AND CALIFORNIA

Thomas Pastuszak, wine director at The NoMad Hotel, New York, looks beyond France for cabernet franc and zeroes in on his home state. "The Finger Lakes appellation is planting the flag for cabernet franc as its main red varietal. The climate and terroir of many vineyard sites in the Finger Lakes are comparable to the Loire Valley, and the grape grows beautifully here," he says. "More producers are bottling these terroir-driven cabernet francs to showcase special vineyards, among them, Hermann J. Wiemer, Red Newt Cellars and Damiani Wine Cellars."

Cabernet franc grows best in Finger Lakes vineyards with shallow topsoil and slate and shale subsoils, says Tyler Tauck, distribution manager at Sheldrake Point Winery on Cayuga Lake. "The results are medium-bodied cabernet franc wines that are bursting with flavor and aroma. Cabernet franc is the most popular red wine, and the sole grape used for our top-selling Sheldrake Point Estate Dry Rosé."

Washington is another bastion of cabernet franc. Columbia Winery was the first to produce cabernet franc in the state. The varietal grows well in Washington state, says Sean Hails, Columbia Winery senior manager, operations/winemaking, who has a soft spot for cabernet franc as he used to grow it in his native Canada. "Our cabernet franc vineyard in the Horse Heaven Hills has the cooling influence of the Columbia River to the south and well-drained, sandy-loam soils plus winds that moderate potential temperature extremes," he says. "Cabernet franc acquired a stepchild status in Bordeaux, because it wasn't always planted in the prime locations."

Opposite, clockwise from top: 1) Domaine de la Bergerie Anjou region cabernet franc grapes. 2) Star Lane Vineyard's cabernet franc vineyard after harvest. 3) Domaine Cady vineyard and winery.

CABERNET FRANC ON THE WINE LIST

At The NoMad Hotel, New York, some guests imagine cabernet franc will be dark, dense and brooding like Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon, observes wine director Thomas Pastuszak. After tasting the wine with its red raspberry and cherry notes, he says, “Diners realize some of the greatest expressions of cabernet franc are lifted, aromatic and backed by sufficient acidity and tannins, much like some of their favorite pinot noirs.”

Because of the natural acidity and tannic structure, Pastuszak pairs medium-bodied, spicy cabernet franc from the Loire with game and pork. “Catherine and Pierre Breton’s Trinch! Bourgueil 2013 matches chef Daniel Humm’s confit of suckling pig with red endive, dandelion and dates,” he says. “The wine’s acidity cuts like a razor through the fat of the pork, and the herbal, berry and mineral character of the wine complements the fruit and vegetable accompaniments of the pork.”

At Oliveto, Oakland, California, the wine list showcases Italian and global wines. Owner Bob Klein prefers to list “wines with a story,” especially family owned wineries that focus on sustainable grape growing. Domaine de Nerleux is a ninth-generation, family owned winery in the Loire’s Saumur-Champigny region. Oliveto manager Jaeson Thieme calls the family’s Les Loups Noirs a “classic cabernet franc with a touch of green pepper savoriness and dark berries” to pair with chef Jonah Rhodehamel’s charcoal-grilled Piedmontese rib-eye steak.

Dan Davis, wine director at Commander’s Palace and Café Adelaide, New Orleans, observes an increase in cabernet franc bottled as a single varietal. At Commander’s Palace, he lists 30 Loire Valley cabernet franc wines dating back to a 1976 Chinon from Catherine and Pierre Breton. Other favorite Loire producers include Domaine de Bernard Baudry, Clos Rougeard and M. Plouzeau. “Fall and winter foods pair well with cabernet franc,” says Davis. “Think, lamb stews, rustic cassoulet, game birds. Sauces with fruit and mushroom components are amazing with these wines, as are legumes and roasted root vegetables.

“I believe that cabernet franc will continue to grow in popularity and prestige. There are fewer contemporary examples of difficult Loire vintages that could produce thin, overly vegetative reds. The increase in plantings in the U.S. and the New World means there are more opportunities to experience the many expressions of cabernet franc.”

Cady of Domaine Cady keeps a watchful eye on the vineyard to tame the tannins. “We wait for sustained sunny weather and then pick for our Anjou Rouge.”

Cabernet franc also exhibits exceptional quality and value when served in Crémant de Loire Rosé. This underappreciated cabernet franc-based category is made in the *méthode champenois*, with the second fermentation in the bottle. In the Saumur region, the Bouvet Ladubay Brut Rosé is fruity and crisp from the cabernet franc grown in the sedimentary marine layers in the estate’s vineyard.

Farther east in the Touraine area, Château Moncontour overlooks the Loire River. The company’s president, Gilles Feray, recommends drinking Moncontour Crémant de Loire Rosé as an apéritif with Asian flavors, fish or tapas. The soft finish also pairs well with fruit tarts, blue cheese or local Sainte Maure goat cheese.

Napa cabernet franc

Winemakers in California rarely have to worry about enough sun for cabernet franc. Their concern is too much heat.

Sommelier Kelli White knows all about the terroir of Napa Valley. At Press in St. Helena, the all-Napa wine list is jampacked with well-ripened, rich-red wines. “Here, cabernet sauvignon rules—but cabernet franc is an easy sell,” says White. “It’s lighter in body and less intense than cabernet sauvignon, but has similar herbal and fresh fruit flavors.

“At wineries such as Hourglass, cabernet franc is different from the leaner and more herbaceous Loire wines. Hourglass is unapologetically modern, which means rich and full-flavor, more red fruit than blue. This is a stylish wine, and many diners like it.”

At Hourglass Winery in Calistoga, owner Jeff Smith almost ripped out the cabernet franc when he bought the BlueLine Estate vineyard in 2006. But after Smith’s winemaker reluctantly vinified the cabernet franc, they were both blown away by the quality of the wine.

“It was a risky decision to bottle the cabernet franc on its own, especially when we priced it at \$135 a bottle, but we felt it was one of the best wines,” Smith says. “Our early fan base was small but rabid, and has grown. We’ve added another acre of vines.”

Crocker & Starr winery also has an eager cabernet franc fan base. When co-owner Charlie Crocker bought the St. Helena property in 1971, he planted cabernet franc first, influenced by a cousin who lived in the Loire. Later, winemaker/co-owner Pam Starr joined the company and matched cabernet franc to the best drained soils on the property.

At Robert Sinskey Vineyards, Sinskey also has a “rabid” following for his cabernet franc, which is growing in European and Scandinavian countries, too. His wife Maria Helm Sinskey,





a renowned chef/cookbook author, recommends rich, earthy, porcini-scented pasta for pairing, which highlights the dried herb notes of the wine.

Livermore Valley, Paso Robles, Santa Barbara County

The soils of Livermore Valley are often compared with those of Bordeaux. Darcie Kent, owner/winemaker of Darcie Kent Vineyards, extols the gravelly soil for a well-balanced cabernet franc in her portfolio. Karl Wentz, senior vice president of winegrowing at Wentz Vineyards, adds that the area's warm days and cool nights also benefit growing the grapes. Wentz farms carefully to avoid the green characteristics by limiting excess vigor through irrigation management. "Before 2006, we used cabernet franc only as a blender," he says. "But it had such beautiful expression, we share it in our Small Lot program."

At Steven Kent Winery, owner/winemaker Steven Mirassou calls cabernet franc part of his "holy trinity" with cabernet sauvignon and petit verdot, and an important element in Lineage, his high-end blend. Mirassou's 2011 Steven Kent Cabernet Franc Small-Lot Ghielmetti Ranch shows a soft mouthfeel, long finish and pronounced acidity for balance. "You could be drinking Chinon," he says. "It's similar to pinot noir in both structure and acid."

Heading southward, Villa San-Juliette in Paso Robles produces a popular cabernet franc in the leaner Loire style that intrigues Francophiles. Matt Ortman, COO/winemaker, crafts a "spice box" variety of cabernet franc. "My dad (Chuck Ortman of Heitz Cellars and Meridian Vineyards fame) always told me that if you want spice in a blend, go for cabernet franc. When you ripen the grapes sufficiently, the bell pepper flavors turn to white and black pepper."

Santa Barbara County's claim to wine fame has centered on pinot noir in the decade since the movie *Sideways*. In the warmer eastern side of the appellation, several wineries excel in Bordeaux varietals such as cabernet franc.

At Gainey Vineyard, general manager/winemaker John Falcone finds that among Bordeaux grapes grown on the estate, cabernet franc most mimics its French cousins. The small production cabernet franc label has an avid following.

At Dierberg and Star Lane vineyards in the eastern sub-appellation of Happy Canyon, winemaker Tyler Thomas applies his previous Sonoma County winemaking experience with Syrah in crafting cabernet franc.

"When I made Syrah in Sonoma, I dealt with white pepper, tobacco, herbal and floral notes," Thomas says. "Our cabernet franc has some of those notes. But I'm not going to hide its savoriness with overly sweet fruit or oak aging. I believe cabernet franc thrives with the savory notes that sommeliers adore."

AJ Fairbanks, president of Dierberg and Star Lane vineyards, also appreciates cabernet franc, especially as a way to throttle back the power of cabernet sauvignon. "California cabernet sauvignon is so obvious and overt and extreme. It's difficult for other Bordeaux varietals to outshine it," he says. "Let's face it. Cabernet franc on its own will always be a niche market."

Thomas agrees, and adds, "If cabernet sauvignon is a symphony, cabernet franc is not as rich a sound, but equally complex." ■

CABERNET FRANC AT THE BAR

Cabernet franc also shows its versatile flavors at the bar. Chris Lowder, bar manager at The NoMad Hotel, New York, makes a creative pairing of cabernet franc in his Shuttlecock apéritif.

"I had an idea for sangria, but needed a wine with enough backbone to stand up to the fruit and bitter notes in the cocktail," Lowder says. "I chose cabernet franc from the Finger Lakes, Charles Fournier Gold Seal Vineyards 2012, to mix with muscatel sherry, maraschino liqueur, yellow chartreuse, lemon, blackberries, mint and orange."

The apéritif pairs well with all the elements of a seafood plate and charcuterie.

Opposite, left to right: Bouvet Ladubay Rosé Excellent; Chateau Moncontour Crément Rosé; Columbia Winery 2012 Cabernet Franc; Wentz Vineyards Small Lot
Above, left to right: Robert Sinskey Vineyards Cabernet Franc; Crocker & Starr Cabernet Franc.

DEBORAH GROSSMAN IS A SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA JOURNALIST WHO WRITES ABOUT PEOPLE, PLACES AND PRODUCTS THAT IMPACT THE FOOD-AND-WINE WORLD.

PHOTO CREDITS Opposite, left to right: Bouvet Ladubay; Chateau Moncontour; Columbia Winery; Wentz Vineyards; above, left to right: Robert Sinskey Vineyards; Crocker & Starr