

Let's be **FR**

Cabernet Franc is an exciting variety that is virtually unknown despite it being an important part of the reds of Bordeaux. Dan Traucki says it's one to watch.

While every wine drinker on the planet knows about Cabernet Sauvignon, most have never heard of Cabernet Franc. The varieties share many characteristics, with the main difference being Cabernet Franc produces lighter-coloured wines with more perfumed aromas, but with the same depth of flavour richness and intensity as Cabernet Sauvignon. Jancis Robinson writes that DNA testing has now proved that Cabernet Sauvignon is in fact the love child of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, which is interesting given that, in most instances, Cabernet Sauvignon has greater depth of colour than Cabernet Franc; logically one would have thought it should be the other way around.

Cabernet Franc buds and ripens a bit earlier (usually by one or two weeks) than Cabernet Sauvignon, thus allowing it to prosper in cooler climates than Cabernet Sauvignon. This is why in earlier, less technologically advanced times, it was more widely planted in Bordeaux, as 'insurance' against colder, wetter vintages where Cabernet Sauvignon would struggle to achieve ripeness. The variety is susceptible to 'shatter' wherein the grapes fail to develop after flowering and it is highly yield-sensitive, with higher yields leading to wines with green vegetative flavours rather than the rich succulent flavours of the full ripeness that can be achieved with lower yields. Cabernet Franc performs well in a variety of soils, producing at its most robust in sandy or chalky soils.

Almost half of the Cabernet Franc planted in France is located in Bordeaux, where at the start of the 20th century there were about equal plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, but since the 1960s, plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon have come to be around double those of Cabernet Franc. Partly through more Cabernet Sauvignon being planted, but more through Cabernet Franc being replaced by the increasingly more popular Merlot.

The most famous Cabernet Franc-predominant wine in the world is Chateau Cheval Blanc (premier grand Cru Classe A) in St Emilion Bordeaux, which is usually around 58 percent Cabernet Franc and 40 percent Merlot with the balance being Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon. The 1947 vintage is

probably the most celebrated wine of the 20th century, having achieved legendary status, while the current vintages sell for between \$1,300 and \$1,800 a bottle.

The other area of France where Cabernet Franc is widely planted is the Loire Valley, where it is prevalent in Chinon, Saumur-Champigny and Anjou. In Anjou, it is mainly used to produce light and bright rosés, the best of which are really enjoyable.

Italy only has about 20 percent of the Cabernet Franc acreage that France does. It is grown mainly in the areas of Friuli and Veneto, with an increasing interest in Tuscany. It is also used in the blend of some Chianti wines. The exact area under vine is rather nebulous; as in Italy it is often confused with Carmenere and even Cabernet Sauvignon.

In the USA, Cabernet Franc is grown to be used in the 'Meritage' blend which is the name used by the Americans for the 'Bordeaux' blend since the French succeeded in banning people from using the word *Bordeaux* on their labels.

In Canada, Inniskillin Wines has made a Cabernet Franc Ice Wine, which is almost as expensive as Chateau Cheval Blanc.

In Australia there are 74 wineries making Cabernet Franc, according to Darby Higgs' Vinodiversity website. Most of these producers use the variety as a blending partner to Cabernet Sauvignon, but a growing band of wineries are now producing varietal Cabernet Franc wines. Most Cabernet Franc is grown in the cooler areas such as the Adelaide Hills, Yarra Valley, Alpine Valley and Kangaroo Island, but there is some grown in warmer areas such as Swan River (Black Swan Wines), Rutherglen, Hunter Valley, McLaren Vale and Barossa.

There were some great wines in the tasting, with the real surprise package being The Islander Estate Vineyards (Kangaroo Island) The Investigator 2006. At eight years old, this wine had a massive depth of colour with no hints of browning, big varietal nose that leapt out of the glass and a big but silky smooth palate with fine tannins that went on for an eternity – a stunning big-style wine. This is the first Aussie heavyweight Cabernet Franc contender I have tasted.



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On the other hand, the Howard Vineyard (Adelaide Hills) 2010 Cabernet Franc was a lighter, brighter wine with graceful aromas and a lovely vibrant varietal palate that made one want to reach for another glassful. It was like an Australian expression of a bloody good Loire red. Just to prove that they have well and truly mastered handling the variety, the Howard Vineyard 2012 Picnic Rosé was perfectly named, as it would go down an absolute treat on a summer picnic. It has oodles of flavour and while there is some sweetness on the palate, it has a lovely crisp, refreshing finish – perfect for summer.

Still in the Adelaide Hills, Paracombe Premium Wines 2009 Cabernet Franc was an elegant, slightly spicy wine with some acidity on the palate making it an outstanding food wine.

There is also a reasonable amount of Cabernet Franc grown in Margaret River, where the cooling ocean breezes keep the area cooler than it would otherwise be. An excellent example of these wines is Happs Wines Three Hills Cabernet Franc 2008, which is just hitting its straps at six years old and has excellent varietal aromas and rich, smooth mouthfilling flavours that linger. Like many of the Cabernet Francs tasted, I think this wine would keep for quite some time if one can keep one's hands off it.

Speaking of keepers, Gapsted Wines Limited Release 2010 Cabernet Franc, which is made from cooler Limestone Coast and King Valley fruit, needs time. It is tight and grippy and needs a good airing before tasting, but I think will live for a long time and develop nicely as it matures.

Cabernet Franc is an exciting variety that is virtually unknown despite its being an important part of the reds of Bordeaux.

Based on the wines tasted, its future here in Australia looks bright and attractive as wine drinkers start steering away from the “alcoholic blockbusters” and more towards elegant, graceful flavour filled wines. I strongly recommend that you keep an eye out for Cabernet Franc and savour its delights.

STOP PRESS: I have just found out that Australia's Merlot Master - James Irvine has recently bottled a Cabernet Franc predominant wine (80% - 20% Grand Merlot) called Percheron from 2012 vintage. Whilst it is not due for release for another few months, I am told that this is a wine that should sit alongside the Irvine Wines Grand Merlot – I can't wait to try it! ■

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