

# San Francisco Chronicle

## The other Cabernet

Jon Bonné, Chronicle Wine Editor ~ Sunday, March 29, 2009

If Cabernet Franc has a pied piper, it might be Aaron Pott. Over the years, the Napa Valley winemaker has quietly taken this misunderstood grape with him from project to project. When Ron and Anita Wornick planted just under 2 acres on their tiny, priceless jewel of a vineyard in the St. Helena hills above Meadowood, Pott persuaded them to include about 15 percent Franc. He has the spiel down "I kind of say it like this: 'Which would you rather taste - a 1961 Chateau Mouton (Rothschild) or a 1961 Cheval Blanc?' " Pott says. "The best expressions of Cabernet Franc are much more interesting than the best expressions of Cabernet Sauvignon."

That is often the minority view. **Says John Skupny of Lang & Reed, probably California's sole Franc-focused winery: "It is definitely the Rodney Dangerfield of the varietals."** This despite hundreds of years of loyal service in Bordeaux and the Loire Valley. Blame the flavors. While Franc offers plenty of fruit - usually lighter and leaning more toward raspberry and blueberry than Cabernet's dark notes - notoriety lies with its herbaceous, floral, sometimes peppery side.

When ripe, those notes provide aromatic allure: dried herb, tobacco, graphite and paprika, not just in red wines but also in fine rosés.

But they also can be Franc's weakness - green, underripe, vegetal flavors. These traits provide fodder for critics who cast Franc as a green-lipped wannabe.

Yet winemakers along the West Coast are finally finding a place in their hearts for Cab Franc, either on its own or as a portion of their blends, even in California, where it has remained a perennial problem child. It earns its keep, if nothing else. Statewide, it averages \$1,421 per ton, more than \$300 more than Cabernet Sauvignon, according to 2008 data.

The frequent loathing of Franc has given its partisans - me among them - all the more reason to seek one another out. No secret handshakes, but when a fellow traveler drops the name of, say, Charles Joguet of Chinon, we take it as a badge of refinement.

"The profile of a Cab Franc drinker? They usually have a great cellar," says Pam Starr, who makes a smoky, ripe Franc under her Crocker & Starr label. (She's a Joguet fan.) "They get it that life is full of

diversity. They can't have the plain box of Crayola crayons. They have to have the mega-box of colors."

### **Grape gets its star moment**

Converts typically come to the Franc side once they understand its historic dual role as both leading man and ensemble member. In the Loire, it is largely responsible for reds from Chinon, Bourgueil and Saumur-Champigny that can immediately refresh but age for decades. Farther south, it serves as part of the blend in many of Bordeaux's most famous wines, notably Chateau Cheval Blanc, which traditionally is about half Cab Franc.

This latter role has swayed many winemakers. Pott learned his lesson as winemaker at Chateau La Tour Figeac in St. Emilion, where he was captivated by a small plot of 60-year-old Cab Franc vines growing across the street from Cheval Blanc. "That's what slammed it home for me," he says.

Now he uses it with most clients, including Blackbird and Quintessa, and makes his own, Pantagruel (an homage to Rabelais, whose beloved Loire reds were presumably Franc). He's planting 2 acres around his house on Mount Veeder.

The irony is that this supporting role has never elevated Franc's fortunes. La Tour Figeac, Cheval Blanc and other top St. Emilion chateaux get an aromatic signature from it. Yet the grape's abilities are typically disregarded, never more so than - sorry to bring this up - in the movie "Sideways," which did a hatchet job on both Merlot and Cab Franc. (Merlot is recovering nicely, at least.)

Cabernet Franc's other big claim is as Cabernet Sauvignon's genetic parent. As Cabernet Sauvignon's star has risen, the elder Cabernet has acquiesced to live in the shadow of its child's fame.

Winemakers can't seem to agree on how to treat it. The dominant view for a long time - thanks in part to the success of ripe, overfruited Cabernet - was that Franc was too much of a wimp to succeed in California. Reality shows otherwise. Look no further than Dalla Valle's Maya, a blend of the two Cabernets that has ranked among Napa's highest-scoring wines.

Franc certainly can be persnickety in its flavors. But it has also been a victim of circumstance - planted on soils that were too wet or too dry, grown too ripe or beaten up in the cellar. Subpar locations can amplify its green side.

Still, exceptional Franc has emerged as winemakers figure out where to plant it. The best examples seem to require well-drained, shallow soils, not the clay that can boost Merlot. (Some California Franc was long mistaken for Merlot, worsening the problem.)

Mineral content is key. In Chinon, simpler wines hail from sandy sites near the river; top bottlings come from chalkier, higher-up vineyards. Pott favors the high iron content - similar to Bordeaux's right bank - in the volcanic Aiken soils that wind through Oakville to the top of Atlas Peak.

The biggest problem may be that Franc's history has led vintners to treat it as second-rate Cabernet. But Franc has a sensitive side. In the Loire, vintners take a delicate approach closer to Burgundy -

little new oak and less time in barrel, with wines often in bottle by the summer after harvest.

### **Cab Franc's sensitive side**

A more useful comparison might be to Pinot Noir - especially with its bright red fruit, earthy overtones and softer tannins. **Skupny realized this when he was fine-tuning his basic North Coast bottling, an homage to Loire bistro wines. "I realized I was beating everything up too much," he says. Now, he uses only old barrels; the wine's in bottle after about nine months. "I really had to go to my Pinot Noir brethren for advice on how to treat it more delicately."**

That delicate nature is also swaying devotees of the Bordeaux model. Chris Camarda of Washington state's Andrew Will Winery was so drawn to "a complexing quality" in the grape that he now uses up to 50 percent Franc in some of his single-vineyard blends.

Camarda and a handful of others are establishing Franc's new frontier up north. If California can be hostile territory, Washington has given Franc an excellent adopted home. Credit a mix of hot days, cold nights and higher latitude (around 46 degrees, similar to the central Loire, hence more summer daylight). The western Yakima Valley hosts excellent sites: the much-used Champoux vineyard, or Camarda's own Two Blondes vineyard outside Zillah, with its intense aromatic fruit.

To the east is Red Mountain, with nonstop sun and stiff winds. Ben Smith of Seattle's Cadence Winery was so bullish on Franc that when he planted his Cara Mia vineyard there he dedicated a full 40 percent to it. The 2007 vintage of his Bel Canto blend is more than 60 percent Franc.

"It has a texture, a mouthfeel, a silkiness that Cabernet Sauvignon doesn't have, period. And it has a complexity that you don't get in Cabernet Sauvignon," Smith says. "And when it's ripe you don't get those veggies, and on Red Mountain it has structure. So what am I losing?"

Taste their wines and the Franc is detectable in a pleasing way, providing a dose of curiosity. This was evident to Camarda in 1996 when he first sampled some from Red Mountain's Ciel du Cheval vineyard. "It tasted great on its own," he recalls, "but what really made the wine for me was its ability to make the Merlot more than what it was."

Curiously, Franc thrives in places where Cabernet Sauvignon struggles, perhaps because its presence in the Loire proved that it could ripen in regions too cold for Cab. Very good examples have emerged from New York's Long Island, and even from Ohio, North Carolina and Ontario. It can be found in Italy's Friuli, on the edge of the Alps.

### **A variety for cooler climates**

But resistance remains. When Camarda asked the owners of Red Mountain's noted Klipsun Vineyard to plant Franc, they refused.

"I almost came unglued out of my shoes and bit my tongue," Camarda recalls. "You could point out to

them that Cheval Blanc, s- wine that it is, can be up to 80 percent Cabernet Franc."

Fear of the green also hampers acceptance. Just ask Robert Foley, who first worked with it at Markham Vineyards in the early 1980s. As a nonbeliever, Foley has made his peace with the grape - growing it as ripe as possible, to at least 25 Brix (a measure of sugar), to get the seeds fully dark and lose any vegetal hints.

"Maybe just a hint of green tea, but you're out of the woods on cat piss and out of the woods on geraniums and all those wonky flavors," he says.

Foley can't seem to escape the grape; for years he made a benchmark version for Pride Mountain Vineyards. Though Foley doesn't use Franc in his own Claret, he still makes one - not entirely voluntarily - for Jeff Smith's Hourglass label.

"I've been Franc'd," he says.

Is that supposed to be a bad thing?

### **History of the grape**

Cabernet Franc's American history dates back to the early 20th century, but only in the late 1970s and early '80s did it begin to take on a notable presence, both as part of the rise of the Meritage movement and, less so, as a varietal.

It has always been a bit polarizing. Veteran winemaker Bob Foley recalls Andre Tchelistcheff advising him to use Franc - *very* sparingly - as a blending component in the mid-'80s. **Yet Lang & Reed's John Skupny points to a 1983 Cabernet Franc bottled under Francis Ford Coppola's label that was a runaway hit.**

By the early 1990s, Franc had caught attention in Washington state, even in New York and even Ontario, where resistance to cold made it more appealing than Cabernet Sauvignon.

Unlike its Cabernet sibling, only a handful of clones for Franc are in major use, although UC Davis' Foundation Plant Services currently lists 14. One of the most popular is 214, interestingly based on a Loire Valley cultivar but frequently used in Bordeaux-style wines.

Several so-called suitcase clones also exist. Foley recalls dealing with cuttings from St. Emilion during his time at Markham in the late 1970s; cuttings from Cheval Blanc and Vieux Chateau Certan have apparently been planted as well.

### **From the notebook**

This sampling of Cabernet Franc varietal and blends from California and Washington mostly reflects a Bordeaux style, which helps explain the higher prices. Though available in limited quantities outside the state, Washington has several other standout Cabernet Francs from such labels as Barrister,

Chinook and Owen Roe. Increasingly, wineries are also making a rosé, emulating the popular Chinon Rosé.

**2006 Andrew Will Two Blondes Vineyard Yakima Valley Red Wine (\$52)** The young vines in Chris Camarda's estate vineyard yield racy, aromatic wines. This new vintage, 43 percent Cabernet Franc plus Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, is no different. Distinct Franc presence on the nose: Tea, leather, ancho chile and flower-tinged berries play the high notes, subtle oak and cassis play the low. Bright, focused and spicy.

**2006 Cadence Bel Canto Cara Mia Vineyard Red Mountain Red Wine (\$55)** From Cadence's estate vineyard in eastern Washington, this is Ben Smith's Cheval Blanc homage, with 52 percent Cabernet Franc and 48 Merlot. Generous, with an almost romantic nose - dry loam, black tea, chamomile, bright huckleberry. Very plush with sweet primary fruit. Fine-grained tannins make for a nuanced structure.

**2006 Crocker & Starr St. Helena Napa Valley Cabernet Franc (\$58)** No green meanies here. A hulking, extracted profile, with gobs of flavor - smoke, coffee, tangy raspberry atop black-fruit undertones, with a slightly aggressive kick at the finish. Plenty of sultry appeal (Starr calls the style "powerful, sexy, sappy") though its Franc roots aren't immediately apparent.

**2006 Hourglass Blueline Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Franc (\$135)** From Jeff Smith's new vineyard near Calistoga. Starts with a smoky whiff, plus cassia and lighter floral notes - high-toned blueberry and a plummy bass line. Broad shouldered, but a supple profile and fine, ripe tannins lift it above a forceful 15.1 percent frame. Bob Foley may be a Franc skeptic, but he can still apply his cult-wine talents to it.

**2007 Lang & Reed North Coast Cabernet Franc (\$22) A Chinon-style bottling sourced mostly from higher-elevation vineyards in Lake County that allow for slower ripening. The rare example below 14 percent alcohol (13.5). It's right on point, with scents of tobacco, mistletoe and sweet blueberry. Juicy and refreshing, with slightly blocky tannins to finish.**

**2006 Palazzo Napa Valley Red Wine (\$60)** Scott Palazzo and his winemaker Peter Franus have caught the attention of places like the French Laundry with their restrained approach. This deeply fruited mix of Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon puts forward cocoa and roast cherry, and then Franc-like notes appear with a subtle floral lift. Keep an eye out for Palazzo's rare but very good varietal 2006 Cabernet Franc, sourced from Carneros' Truchard Vineyards.

### **Franco in France**

The Loire Valley's Franco-based wines have long had a California fan base, perhaps in part due to importer Kermit Lynch's advocacy. Some good names include:

**Bernard Baudry (Chinon)   Domaine de Beausejour (Chinon)   Catherine and Pierre Breton (Bourgeuil, Chinon)**  
**Charles Joguet (Chinon)   Jean-Maurice Raffault (Chinon)   Olga Raffault (Chinon)**

## JON BONNÉ ~ THE CELLARIST ~ SAVORING THE WORLD, ONE GLASS AT A TIME

### They came from the past ...

One topic that came up several times during my reporting on Cabernet Franc for [last Sunday's Food & Wine story](#) was whether wines made from it can age.

My first response was: *Of course*, silly. Whether you look at it in its Old World templates of Loire (varietal) or Bordeaux (Right Bank blends), it is virtually destined to age, in part because it retains acidity quite well and all those bright fruit notes give it more lift that can mellow over time. Compare this to Cabernet Sauvignon, which has plenty of tannic heft to help along aging, but can also falter under its own weight and ripeness.

Indeed, even a simple Chinon can have a long life. I recall stumbling onto a transcendent bottle of 1989 Chinon in a London pizzeria (of all places) earlier this decade, softened to mellow plum notes after about 12 years, with all the smoke and curiosity but less youthful punch. Though the Loire versions of Franc can be consumed young in all their exuberance, they take on more serious tones after a few years. By default, I now hold back most of mine for a bit, just to enjoy them more. The 2005s are just now beginning to get my attention; and it'll be several more years, I suspect, before I tackle that magnum of 2003 Joguet.

Still, American counterparts don't always fare so well, as the often fading fortunes of Napa Cabernets can attest (witness the 1997s).

Along with the current releases I tasted for the story, **I also tried a few back vintages of the Lang & Reed** and Andrew Will wines. The results were generally positive for the pro-aging camp, though caution is advised. **A 1998 Lang & Reed Premier Etage Napa Valley Cabernet Franc had taken on the trappings of Franc age -- dried tea and a slight lingering vegetal tone -- with some pretty evolved notes but also hints it was in its twilight.** A **2002 Andrew Will Washington State Cabernet Franc** was more direct, with boysenberry and dried tomato leaf, but its richness seemed a bit *too* mellow after just seven years. A **2003 Pride Sonoma County Cabernet Franc** still had plenty of primary blue fruit, but with a slightly sweet chocolate overtone that made the wine a bit too simple.

And yet a **1996 Andrew Will Washington State Cabernet Franc** was flat-out gorgeous, full of life and aromatic lift: dried orange, perfumed tobacco and plenty of racy red primary fruit left to go. Winemaker Chris Camarda has a knack for ageable wines -- we tried a 1994 Cabernet last year that was just coming into its own -- and the '96 Franc was still plenty youthful, certainly holding its own with contemporaneous Bordeaux. Would that I could say that for many Cabernets.

**Just as encouraging, perhaps even more so, was the 2000 Lang & Reed Napa Valley Cabernet Franc. This is made by John and Tracey Skupny as their tribute to the Loire's basic bistro wines; hence, meant for the now. At nine years on, it had taken on the same sorts of layers that a good Loire Franc can: an earthy,**

**spicy nose of paprika, tobacco and wild blueberry. A touch evolved, certainly, but just where it should have been. It brought back to mind that Chinon in the London pizzeria, which I suspect is exactly what they were hoping to achieve.**  
**March 31, 2009**