

Cabernet Franc

3 Sep 2008 by JR

I'm not a huge enthusiast for the sexual stereotyping of wines but even I can see that Cabernet Franc might be described as the feminine side of Cabernet Sauvignon. It is subtly fragrant and gently flirtatious rather than massively muscular and tough in youth. Because Cabernet Sauvignon has so much more of everything – body, tannin, alcohol, colour – it is often supposed to be necessarily superior, but I have a very soft spot indeed for its more charming and more aromatic relative, Cabernet Franc.

No-one was very sure of the exact relationship between Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc until 1997 when some of the pioneers of DNA typing techniques as applied to grapevines established what any child could have guessed: that Cabernet Sauvignon is the progeny of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, so in fact Cabernet Franc must have predated Cabernet Sauvignon by quite a while.

As a vine and a wine, Cabernet Franc is more precocious than Cabernet Sauvignon – but then most varieties are. Cabernet Franc buds and ripens at least a week before Cabernet Sauvignon, which makes it particularly useful in Bordeaux's cooler vintages when the more famous Cabernet may not reach full ripeness at all. In fact, underripe Cabernet Sauvignon can smell remarkably like fully ripe Cabernet Franc, both of them exhibiting a certain leafy, currant bush aroma. But fully ripe Cabernet Franc has a lovely lightness of touch, lighter and softer than Cabernet Sauvignon so that the wines can mature several years ahead of Cabernet Sauvignon grown in the same vineyard.

In practice the two varieties are typically grown together and blended in to the same wine. This is certainly true of the Médoc and Graves in Bordeaux where Cabernet Franc, and the plumper but in many ways quite similar Merlot, are grown as a sort of insurance policy against Cabernet Sauvignon's not ripening properly. And they can also provide usefully softening blending material in this temperate climate which rarely produces Cabernet Sauvignon so ripe that it makes a well balanced 100 per cent varietal wine (in stark contrast to, say, northern California).

While Cabernet Franc was as widely grown in Bordeaux as Cabernet Sauvignon in the 1960s, it was considerably displaced by the more fashionable Merlot in the late 20th century but I sense a small but perceptible comeback – even if Cabernet Franc did not perform at all well in 2006, for example. On the right bank, in St Emilion and Pomerol, Cabernet Franc, or Bouchet as it has traditionally been known, is by far the most-planted Cabernet, chiefly because Cabernet Sauvignon was difficult to ripen on the cool soils so far inland until the recent spate of heatwave summers. But if ever proof were needed that Cabernet Franc can produce truly majestic, ethereal wine, it is provided by Ch Cheval Blanc, two-thirds of whose vineyard is planted with Cabernet Franc, the rest being Merlot. The variety was a particular favourite, and selection, of the original proprietor Jean Laussac-Fourcaud.

The other French wine region dominated by Cabernet Franc is Anjou-Touraine in the Loire, especially Chinon, Bourgueil, St Nicolas de Bourgueil, Saumur-Champigny and Anjou-Villages, although warmer summers and improved viticultural practices have allowed Cabernet Sauvignon rather more of a presence in vineyards here in recent years. The Cabernet Franc-dominated reds here can be weedy and stringy in cooler vintages – or if the vine's canopy is not carefully managed - but when the grapes ripen fully they have a beautiful silky texture, soft tannins and a characteristic aroma which has long reminded me of pencil shavings. This far north, however, the wines tend to be heavily influenced by the exact characteristics of the vintage. These wines are often drinkable after only a year or two in bottle but the best can age beautifully too. With their relatively high acidity, they are not, unfortunately, the most fashionable wines (outside the bistros of Paris) but they respond well to being lightly chilled and so are particularly useful for red wine lovers in high summer. The 2002s are drinking particularly well now and the 2004s may be worthy classical successors. Drink 1996s and 1997s from top producers if you can find them.

Cabernet Sauvignon has rarely made wines of real distinction in the Languedoc but Cabernet Franc has been making inroads recently and several varietal versions of interest have arrived on the international marketplace in the last couple of years.

A considerable area of north east Italy was planted with 'Cabernet', the majority of which is Cabernet Franc even if a certain proportion in Friuli has proved to be the old Bordeaux variety also encountered in Chile, Carmenère. As in France, yields have to be kept below a certain maximum if the wines are not to be offputtingly herbaceous and grassy. The variety is increasingly well-regarded by the burgeoning ranks of ambitious wine producers in Tuscany, particularly in Bolgheri on the Tuscan coast – not just for blending with other Bordeaux varieties but in pure, 100 per cent varietal form. In such a warm climate, Merlot can be almost too ripe and raisiny but Cabernet Franc can be rewardingly elegant and appetising. A certain amount of Cabernet Franc is also grown quite widely in Hungary where it can make wines which combine both ripeness and refreshment.

Outside Europe, Cabernet Franc has typically been grown simply to copy faithfully the Bordeaux blending recipe for wines such as California's Meritage blends, but there are distinct signs that it is being re-evaluated on its own merits by some producers. Viader's almost-cult red, for example, is now an almost equal blend of the two Cabernets while Lang & Reed is a label developed by Francis Ford Coppola's ex sales director

specifically to showcase California's particularly rich form of Cabernet Franc. Washington state Cabernet Franc has been particularly successful (even if Syrah is more popular) – and usefully withstands the freezing winter temperatures better than Merlot. The variety really comes into its own in the north east of the United States and Canada where the climate is too cool to ripen Cabernet Sauvignon. It is particularly successful on Long Island in New York, as well as in Virginia, Pennsylvania and the Finger Lakes. In Ontario, Inniskillin even make an expensive sweet, super-acid, pale pink Cabernet Franc Icewine which sells for almost as much as Cheval Blanc per spoonful. In Chile Valdivieso have long made a special Cabernet Franc. The variety is increasingly popular in South Africa where Bruwer Raats is the pioneer of fine varietal bottlings although he has to struggle with his vines' tendency to ripen even individual bunches very unevenly. Cabernet Franc is slowly catching on in Australia, even if it is dwarfed in importance by Cabernet Sauvignon. It has long been relatively popular in the much cooler climate of New Zealand. It has yet to make much impact on South America although it is certainly grown there and Valdivieso have long made a relatively expensive one. And one final important grower of Cabernet Franc: China where the variety makes up an estimated 10 per cent of the fastest-growing vine in the world. I for one hope we will continue to see more Cabernet Franc wines – they are just so easy to drink.

Please feel free to add any of your favourite Cabernet Franc-dominated wines below.

Some favourite Cab Franc-dominated wines:

Château Cheval Blanc

Yannick Amirault, Bourgeuil, Petite Cave

Domaine des Roches Neuves, Saumur-Champigny, Terres Chaudes

Philippe Alliet, Chinon, Vieilles Vignes

Paleo, Le Macchiole

Tenuta di Trinoro

'W' Cabernet Franc, Poggio al Tesoro (Allegrini's new Bolgheri)