

Just a Blending Grape?

Cabernet Franc is prospering in Virginia's climate and gaining fans.

Jason Burrus

On more than one occasion, a visitor at the winery asks me, "Isn't Cabernet Franc just a blending grape?" I cringe every time. Where in the psyche of the connoisseur is the idea born that some wine-grape varieties are relegated to lowly blending status? The fact is, all wine-grape varieties are blending grapes. It is only a recent phenomenon that a wine is labeled to reflect its predominant variety and not its place of origin. As a result, celebrities of the wine world were born: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay. Anything else was *just* a blending grape.

Though rather obscure to the American wine drinker, Cabernet Franc has an illustrious past. The famous French ampelographer Pierre Galet recounts how this ancient Bordeaux variety spread to the Loire Valley, likely in the 17th century. It was planted there by an abbot named Breton, a name that stands today as a local synonym for Cabernet Franc. The pedigree of grapevines is often lost in history, but technology can sometimes fill in the gaps. In 1997, scientists in the department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of California at Davis produced DNA evidence to confirm that Cabernet Franc and the white variety Sauvignon Blanc are the parents of Cabernet Sauvignon. Before this, it was thought that Cabernet Franc was the progeny of Cabernet Sauvignon.

Today Cabernet Franc is most known for its role in the wines of Bordeaux and the Loire Valley. In Bordeaux, it is commonly a 10 to 20 percent component of its red wines. Two well-known exceptions are wines from Chateaux Ausone and Cheval Blanc, the only two wineries to receive the highest Saint-Émilion classification of premier grand cru classé A. Here, Cabernet Franc is present as a 50 percent component (with Merlot). In Loire, it is the most planted red variety and is often the only variety in the wines of the Saumur-Champigny, Bourgueil, St. Nicolas-de-Bourgueil, and Chinon regions of Loire. While not commanding the superstar prices of today's Bordeaux, Loire Cabernet Francs are some of the most respected wines of France.

Its largest foothold outside of France is likely in Italy, especially in the northeast part of the country in the Veneto and Friuli regions. As in Loire, Italian wines are stand-alone wines where Cabernet Franc is the dominant variety. However, recent examination has revealed that much of what was thought to be Cabernet Franc there is actually Carmenère, another Bordeaux variety with characteristics similar to Cabernet Franc. Small pockets of Cabernet Franc are found in southeastern Europe as well as most other developed winemaking regions of the world. In New World winemaking regions, plantings are usually designated for the purpose blending in Meritage-style wines. Of notable exception is, of course, Cabernet Franc's presence in Virginia and along the East Coast as far north as Canada.

East Coast Cabernet Franc is unique in that, in many cases, it is destined as a stand-alone wine, like those of France's Loire.

Cabernet Franc's newfound home here was not an accident. The European grape (*Vitis vinifera*) originated along the Mediterranean and in the Middle East, areas that experience warm winters and dry summers. Most *V. vinifera* varieties thus are fickle when transplanted out of this climate. Thomas Jefferson experienced this firsthand in his infamously unsuccessful attempt at growing the European grape here in Virginia. With time and experience, though, we are discovering which varieties can withstand the East Coast's viticultural threats.

Cabernet Franc is one such variety suitable for our continental climate. It is especially cold-hardy, surviving frigid winters with constant below-freezing temperatures. It also ripens relatively early for a red Bordeaux variety, easily two weeks earlier than Cabernet Sauvignon. In our climate, this can make a world of difference. It is not surprising then that Cabernet Franc has found homes in the Loire Valley and northeast Italy, regions typically too cold for many red wine-grape varieties. In Virginia, the issue is not imminent cold weather during ripening but rather excessive rain and humidity, which can exacerbate the looming threat of rot. Thus a head start in ripening is a clear advantage over other varieties.

Why has America not bestowed celebrity status on Cabernet Franc? At its best it makes a wine similar to that of Merlot, robust and brimming with berry flavors. With typically less tannin and more obvious aromatics, it can be enjoyed with less age than Cabernet Sauvignon. America became familiar with fine wine as Bordeaux was ascending the ladder of prominence in the international wine scene, and Cabernet Sauvignon was the dominant player in many of its examples. Loire Valley reds never struck a chord with Americans. In unripe vintages its wines were thin and vegetal. Even in ripe years its wines had a focused acidity that was never appreciated by the American palate.

If Cabernet Franc is ever to gain ground with critics and consumers in the United States, it must be able to compete with the red wine celebrities of California, notably Cabernet Sauvignon. Therefore East Coast examples of Cabernet Franc are often made in the ripe, fruit-forward, oaky style of their West Coast counterparts. Whether this is wise direction, or whether measuring up to California reds is at all possible, for Cabernet Franc remains to be seen. And whether Cabernet Franc can highlight Virginia as world-class winemaking region is also a work in progress. It is a question 220 years in the making.

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