



CABERNET FRANC

DAVID AND MONICA STEVENS – 750 WINES/ST. HELENA

We asked four of the top winemakers producing Napa Valley Cabernet Franc about this grape and the reason they were drawn to make wine from it, the unique challenges of making a Franc, the differences and similarities they find between a Bordeaux-style Franc and what they are making in the Napa Valley. Here is our conversation with John Skupny, Proprietor & Winemaker ~ Lang & Reed Wine Company.

What was it about Cabernet Franc that inspired you in the direction of making Cabernet Franc?

Both Tracey and I were schooled in classic European wine before emigrating to the Napa Valley in 1980 and thus we were aware of the charms of Cabernet Franc from the Loire Valley, as well as what part it played in the Bordeaux blending puzzle. In the cellar and from barrel we found that Napa Valley Cabernet Franc seemed to express itself at an early stage – both aromatically and flavor wise – it was this early charm that attracted us to explore Cabernet Franc fashioned on its own, at 100% beginning in 1993.

We've heard that Cabernet Franc can be a difficult grape to master. What are some of the challenges you have encountered with CF and how have you addressed them?

Every varietal has its own set of characteristics and challenges and Franc is no different. In making Franc I ascribe to a 'less is more' approach and seek to bring forth nuance and subtly over power or density. By recognizing the delicacy of the grape we strive to expose its underlying tenderness.

There is a tipping point for Franc, on the vine vegetative characteristics mature into herbaceous; capturing just the right amount of those herbaceous aromatics, and flavor, helps express the charm and inherent nature of Franc. The herbaceous qualities, along with the supporting acid, are components that make Franc an amazingly versatile wine with a broad variety of foods.

Stated another way - Under ripe or over cropped grapes will express vegetative – overripe will wipe out the inherent varietal characteristics, thus its purpose or charms.

How do you describe the differences between CF from The Loire, Bordeaux and Napa Valley? ...and how are they similar?

We cannot replicate Chinon or St. Emilion here, nor can the French emulate Napa Valley over there. Each expresses their own set of circumstances, that combination of soil, aspect and climate. With Franc, we enjoy a little more sun, and usually, a more stable growing season so Cabernet Franc generally shows more bravado and opacity than counterparts in the Loire which are often a little more racy and sinewy.

As for Bordeaux it is difficult to assess purity of Franc character as the grape is a bit of a chameleon, taking on the characteristics that are brought to it by other varieties and few wines in the region contain much Franc. It is a critical addition for aromatics and supporting structure, but rarely the lead player.

Similarities are more likely found in the best cuvee, or lieu dit [single site] bottling's, from the Loire, where the floral aromatics are accented by herbaceousness and a solid beam of cherry-blueberry fruit is present.

Are there any noticeable trends in the marketplace with Cabernet Franc?

Nowadays there are many more people who have experienced a broader selection of Cabernet Franc than a decade ago, both domestic and imported. The very bright side is that there is a whole new generation of wine lovers who are far less 'set in their ways' who revel at the differences in flavor and experiences that include Cabernet Franc.

The continuing food revolution, which includes the 'snout to tail' ethos has also provided plenty of goodies that traditionally match so well with Cabernet Franc, such as Rillettes [traditionally prepared with pork].

What is happening with your Cabernet Franc in the Vineyard at this time of the year (spring)?

Cabernet Franc is really the 'conservatively compassionate' grapevine in the fact that, in the spring, it is a mid-season bloomer and at harvest a mid-season ripener – avoiding frosts in the spring and inclement weather in the fall. Right now bud push is happening which will lead to bloom in the lusty month of May!

Please feel free to add any other information regarding the grape, your style, philosophy, etc...fun facts...anything:

A favorite quote... Andrew Jefford ~ Fine Wine Review #62 2011

"Loire expert Jacqueline Friedrich, author of A Wine and Food Guide to the Loire (Mitchell Beazley 1996) also underlined aromatic articulacy, particularly in older wines. Friedrich told me she saw Loire Cabernet Franc as being necessarily edgy and salient, "all nouns and verbs", and having something of the purity and sparseness of medieval music to it, "as opposed to the symphony that is Cabernet Sauvignon." It's emphatically "not a wine for those who like fat reds". That, she suggested, was why it struggled to find acceptance in new wine-drinking cultures, even though (like Burgundy) it has great gastronomic aptitude. John Skupny cited "the inherent charm or tenderness that is more "Pinot-like than Cabernet Sauvignon" as being a key to his own infatuation with the grape.

Locavore Cheese Affinities:

One could imagine that goat cheese was invented in the Loire Valley specifically to be enjoyed with Cabernet Franc; one only needs to look at St. Maure – made only miles from Chinon. It is offered as a fresh youthful, bright and tangy goat cheese perfect for youthful francs or 'ashed' and aged to a mellow patina perfect with older, mature franc.

From northern California the first would be suitably replaced with Cypress Groves famous 'Humboldt Fog' and the second would be satisfied with Andente's Acapella, either in Pryamid or an Ashed Round – or an Aged Crostin from Andente would also work with finely aged Napa Valley Cabernet Franc.

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