

Wine Spectator

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California Underdogs

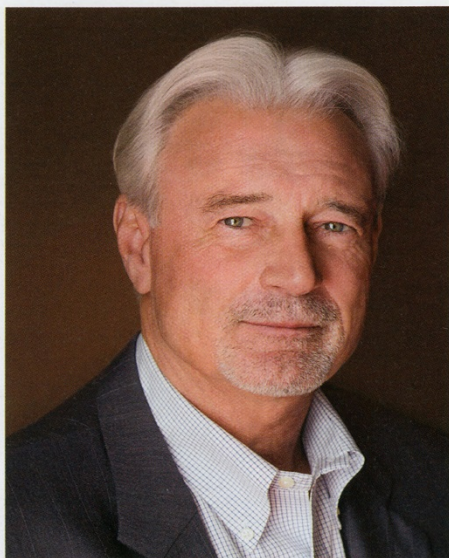
John Skupny came to Napa Valley from Kansas City by way of San Francisco in the early 1980s. His love of wine began while working in restaurants, where he met his future wife, Tracey. The two Francophiles eloped to France in 1977 and were married in the Loire Valley. They soon set their sights on California, where he shifted gears, working in wine sales and marketing, hitching a ride on the Caymus Cabernet bandwagon. He longed to make his own wine and eventually did, but it took time since he was so well-suited to selling other people's.

Back then, Caymus was hardly the juggernaut it is today. Charlie Wagner's Rutherford winery, morphing from a modest mom-and-pop ranching operation, was still seeking a toehold in the wine industry. Charlie and his wife, Lorna, along with their son, Chuck, owned a 70-acre vineyard planted to a handful of grapes, but they had no practical experience running a winery, and the business was threadbare. Charlie held court in a tiny tasting room, connected to the world with only a single telephone line. A pile of dogs were often camped by the door.

Skupny played an influential role in directing the Wagners toward what became their strengths—estate-grown wines, along with a second label called Liberty School. Yet Skupny continued to dream of having a label of his own. He prepped for that day by making wine at home and even planted a small garden-sized vineyard in his backyard. Meanwhile the Wagners were prospering, as were those in their orbit, like winemakers Randy Dunn and Dick Grace, whose Dunn Vineyards and Grace Family Vineyards would become important players in Napa.

Skupny kept looking for his winemaking niche. It took another decade, but by 1996 he had founded his own label, Lang & Reed Wine Co., devoted to exploring the nuances of Cabernet Franc, a wine that he and Tracey had come to admire. The winery is named for the couple's two sons, who stand to take it over.

The wine's initial style tilted toward Chinon, the traditional



As prices for Cabernet Franc have risen sharply, John and Tracey Skupny have stayed true to their belief in value.

home for Franc in the Loire, medium-weight rather than open-throttle, with a bent toward value. It sold for \$17. A second, weightier wine called Premier Étage followed, but it too eschewed the more musclebound style popular in Napa, staying truer to Chinon instead.

Early on, it was easy finding Franc vineyards, which gave the Skupnys freedom to choose. But Franc began to gain stature among vintners, who found it a better match with Cabernet than Merlot, and demand slowly drove up prices to the point where the grape became scarce and expensive. Though still prized more for blending than as a stand-alone, it is the highest-priced red grape in Napa today.

Grape prices in Napa eventually pushed the Skupnys to Lake County (and to a North Coast designation) for their main Franc bottling, and though they've added another, smaller-production Napa Franc to their roster, they've stayed true to their belief in value. The Lang & Reed Cabernet Franc North Coast 2013 (91 points, \$27) is a spirited medley of dark berry,

underbrush and melted chocolate, a surefire crowd-pleaser.

They recently extended their homage to the Loire by delving into Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay's less-familiar alter ego, grown in two locations: Napa and Mendocino. As with their Franc bottlings, the style of the Skupnys' Chenin pays tribute to the grape's zesty, fruity and floral attributes. The current-release Chenins also sell for \$27.

To stake their territory, the Skupnys have hitched their wagon to two underdog grapes. Cabernet Franc, once the afterthought of Bordeaux varieties, is much in demand in California. A few wineries, with an eye to the world's champion of Franc, Cheval-Blanc, make it as a stand-alone varietal. But most of the time Franc is used in smaller doses to tame Cabernet's wilder impulses, likely to keep it a second fiddle to the more powerful instrument.

Chenin is enjoying a modest revival as well. Once, along with Riesling, it was a major Napa white. Its acreage has dwindled, but it retains pockets of enthusiasm from those who enjoy the value of grape purity and the absence of oak. Upon finding their own niche, the Skupnys have validated their instinct that quality and value are always in fashion.

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