



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

FRENCH FAVOURITE NEEDS PROMOTION

Cabernet franc has pedigree stamped all over it. It can produce sublimely perfumed and elegant wines with the potential to age gracefully. It blends effortlessly with its fellow co-conspirators in Bordeaux and proudly holds court in the Garden of France - the middle Loire region of Touraine. Cabernet franc has small berries ensuring a good skin to juice ratio, important for character building anthocyanins and gets along in a number of different soils, including limestone, clay and sand.

According to Robinson et al in *Wine Grapes* (2012) cabernet franc is thought to have originated in the Basque Country and is the offspring of two old cultivars (morenoa and mondarribi beltza). It is a seriously old grape. Breton is the old name for cabernet franc in the Loire, while in Bordeaux it was known as bouchet and records, as early as 1534, mention the grape variety. It has been identified as a parent of some better-known grapes. It's a parent of cabernet sauvignon along with sauvignon blanc. This crossing is thought to have only occurred as recently as the 18th century in Bordeaux. While merlot's parents are magdeleine noires des charentes and, you guessed it, cabernet franc.

In Bordeaux it makes up a small proportion of the blend in the Medoc (left bank) appellations but takes on more of a role in the right bank and especially in the glamorous, top ranking Saint-Emilion Chateau of Cheval Blanc where it makes up 58 per cent of the blend with merlot, which accounts for the remainder.

In Europe cabernet franc is a medium-bodied red wine, with noticeable acidity

and fresh, lively red fruits, often raspberry-driven as well as some graphite and leafy notes. Other wines display light floral aromas especially violets and rose petals. It has softer tannins than cabernet sauvignon but is not as plush and fruity as merlot. It sits on the lighter side. They are great food wines, supporting cuisine rather than dominating it.

In the Touraine there are three notable areas of production both north and south of the Loire and down river from the city of Tours - Bourgueil, St.Nicolas de

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Bourgueil and Chinon. Closest to Tours is the Bourgueil appellation which sits on a south-facing limestone slope and makes medium-bodied wines with more tannin content than the two other regions. The wines have a reputation for ageing. St. Nicholas de Bourgueil is to the west and on warmer soils with higher sand content and tends to be fruitier, lighter bodied, and more for early consumption. Finally, the appellation of Chinon covers 2300ha of vineyards on both sides of the river Vienne, a tributary lying south of the Loire. Cabernet franc is grown on three types of soils here:

riverbed sand and gravel, tuffeau limestone slopes and a clay and gravel plateau. Terroir plays an important part here. You get lighter, fruitier wines from the sand and gravel near the river's flood plain. The tuffeau slopes produce more tannic, longer ageing wines; while the plateau wines are more elegant. Producers either keep the wines separate or blend the three distinct terroirs together. I love the expression that "chinon is a Frenchman's wine" indicating that the best examples are drunk by locals with inside knowledge and you don't see many on the export market. They are very popular in Paris.

So, why doesn't such a noble grape rate more than a mention in Australia? I'm posing a question that is difficult to answer. Across the globe other varieties have been picked off the shelf from France and have been successfully planted and made a name for themselves. Malbec in Argentina, sauvignon blanc in New Zealand, riesling and shiraz in Australia, carmenere in Chile, tannat in Uruguay, the list goes on, but no mention of cabernet franc. It could be the reputation of franc being suited to a cool climate; it ripens earlier than cabernet sauvignon, but is unpleasant with green methoxypyrazine and herbaceous aromas if it doesn't reach maturity. Placed in that context maybe we have always had easier and more reliable grapes to plant in Australia.

Neill Robb owner and winemaker together with daughter Sasha at Sally's Paddock/Redbank Winery have been growing cabernet franc in the Pyrenees region since 1982. Their famous Sally's Paddock

brand includes cabernet franc along with cabernet sauvignon, shiraz, merlot and malbec from vines dating back to 1973, and Robb celebrated the wine's 40th anniversary a couple of years back. I was privileged to taste the back vintages and they hold up extremely well, and the brand truly rates as one of Australia's iconic wines and should receive more attention. They also produce a straight, full-bodied cabernet franc which displays bold black cherry fruit and supple tannins. Robb regards it as their most consistent varietal as opposed to other producers who have difficulty maintaining the wine quality. "It seems inconsistent in some regions making a full, rich wine for two years and then a thin, light coloured wine the next. It may be something to do with irrigation or trying to maximise production," Robb comments. "It may be that we are fortunate that this variety suits our terroir and our naturally self-sustaining vineyard practices." Robb's vineyards are all dry grown/non-irrigated. It could be that cabernet franc is a fickle, unforgiving variety demanding perfect vintage conditions, low yields and responds well to organic/biodynamic treatment, and if you stray off these lines then it displays its nasty side.

Sasha Robb adds that cabernet franc is one of their most popular wines at cellar door, especially with women. "They find it a lot more approachable than a straight cabernet sauvignon," she comments. She has probably hit on one of the problems, cabernet franc is a "hard sell", a bit of a shy wallflower and needs to be explained and introduced. 