

# WAKING A SLEEPING BEAUTY

While cabernet franc might be a star in the northern hemisphere, it has been on the fringe in Australia, until now.



## DENNIS GASTIN

JANCIS Robinson introduces her chapter on cabernet franc in her much venerated *Vines, Grapes and Wine* reference guide saying that it “languishes in the shadow of the much more revered cabernet sauvignon”. But she adds that “no grape primarily responsible for Chateau Cheval Blanc can be dismissed so summarily”. She further notes that “it is capable of producing truly great wine in St. Emilion and some very good ones in the middle Loire”.

In Australia, cabernet franc has not been ignored, but it has certainly been a “sleepy” variety. It has a history dating back to the early 1800s, arriving initially in James Busby’s legendary nursery collection in 1832. Today it can be found, in small quantities, in most regions, but it has never made it into the mainstream as a stand-alone varietal. It accounts for less than 1 per cent of total wine grape plantings and has mostly been used as a blending grape, as a minor addition to cabernet sauvignon in the Bordeaux style.

There are positive signs, however, that this is now changing. The area planted

has not increased, but there is growing confidence among winemakers that they can make wines with this variety that will please drinkers, with cooler regions leading the way.

The Vinodiversity website lists 70 wineries that are now making cabernet franc varietal wines in Australia. The wineries listed are in all states, except Tasmania, and from 31 of Australia’s 65 GI regions. But that is certainly not all of them. I know of at least three Tasmanian wineries with straight cabernet francs and two others using this variety as a significant proportion in a blend. No doubt there are more in other regions, too.

I first discovered this variety in the late 1970s, in the hands of winemakers who didn’t think it would sell as a declared variety and were using it, undeclared, in blends. I kept on searching and the first straight varietal version I found, in the mid-1990s, was actually a very full-bodied sparkling cabernet franc, the work of one of the great industry pioneers of the 1980s/1990s, Wayne Thomas, in McLaren

Vale. I still regard it as one of the best examples of a wine from this variety I have seen in Australia. But he didn’t think it would sell and it was never released, though I bought a dozen unlabelled bottles and, for me, they certainly justified Thomas’s belief in the variety.

Even very recently a winemaker, with a quite stunning cabernet franc, told me he makes only a token amount as a stand-alone varietal, using the rest in a generic rosé because, he said, it’s easier to sell that way – no variety declared.

But confidence is growing. And one person who is determined to terminate the sleepy history of this variety is Australia’s merlot pioneer, Jim Irvine. Merlot was also a sleepy variety in Australia, but Irvine gave it a life in the mainstream.

After tasting Chateau Petrus in the 1970s and being thoroughly impressed he had set, as his long-term goal, the making of a world-class merlot in Australia. He literally turned the wine world upside down in 1997 when his 1992 Irvine Grand Merlot defeated all the northern hemisphere candidates







in the search for the World's Best Merlot by the Swiss Academie du Vin, clearly triumphing over the global benchmark with this variety and one of the world's most expensive wines, Chateau Petrus, his original inspiration.

Now, after selling the famous Irvine brand in late 2014, he has set his sights on cabernet franc. He says that back in the 1980s as a consultant winemaker for a winery in the Barossa Valley, he walked into the fermentation room one morning and was stunned by the lovely floral smell (of violets) coming from one particular tank (which he discovered was cabernet franc) and, from that point, was determined to work with it. He began to trial it in different formats and it resulted in two very successful outcomes under the Irvine label - The Baroness (a super-premium blend of merlot, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon) and the Irvine Estate Merlot Cabernet Franc.

His first cabernet franc, under his new Marjico (Marjorie and Jim Co) label, with an eye catching art piece on the label by Pieter Brueghel, hit the market in April. Merlot lingers in Marjico, but is on the way out: the 2014 has 20 per cent merlot, the 2015 has just 8 per cent and he expects the 2016 to be 100 per cent cabernet franc.

Irvine is not the only industry veteran with his mind set on this variety. Brian Croser is another. He was reported recently as saying that: "people are looking for more subtlety and cabernet franc delivers that in spades." It represents 44 per cent of the blend in his 2013 Tapanappa Whalebone Vineyard Merlot Cabernet Franc.

Jacques Lurton, who worked with Croser at Petaluma in the 1980s, chose cabernet

franc as the focus for his red wine when he planted his intriguing vineyard on South Australia's remote Kangaroo Island, called The Islander Estate Vineyard. He sees his "flagship" wine, The Investigator (a blend of 90 per cent cabernet franc and 10 per cent malbec), as the tool to put Kangaroo Island on the world map of wine.

Another French winemaker who has made SA his base and has targeted cabernet franc as a style statement is Xavier Bizol, in his Wrattobully vineyard. His Terre a Terre Rouge is a blend of Bordeaux varieties with cabernet franc as the major component and was first produced in 2014, as was his premium level Crayeres Vineyard, a straight cabernet franc.

Viticulturists say that it does best in cool climates and what is being done with the variety in Orange, New South Wales tends to confirm that. Although still just a trickle, if the cabernet francs I have been tasting from barrels during recent visits to Orange end up as straight varietals, cabernet franc could eventually become a signature variety for the region.

One of the region's pioneers, who has had this variety in his portfolio since his first plantings in the early 1980s, is Bloodwood founder Stephen Doyle, who referred to it years back as "poor man's pinot". Although they are always quietly presented, as is the case with most winemakers working with this variety, his examples have always impressed.

Ross Hill Wines, one of the region's largest wineries, released its first straight cabernet franc in 2003, from 2ha of vines actually planted near Bloodwood's vineyard on Griffin Rd in 1996, at 780m.

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It now produces around 300 cases per year of its Pinnacle straight cabernet franc and 1000 cases of a 50/50 blend with merlot. A clear indication of what can be achieved with this variety is that the Ross Hill's 2015 Pinnacle Cabernet Franc was judged the equal top wine in Winestate's 2017 review of Central NSW wines, and previous vintages have been very highly ranked in earlier Winestate tastings.

Philip Shaw Wines is another Orange winery about to follow with a straight cabernet franc. It has been using it in blends with merlot but winemaker Daniel Shaw thinks he has finally convinced the rest of the family that a straight varietal can win customer approval. His barrel samples are very impressive.

By contrast, the Upper Hunter region's James Estate has been very up front with cabernet franc. Its 4ha of cabernet franc were planted in 2001 and it has been doing a very impressive straight varietal red since 2005, as well as a cabernet franc rosé. It is the only winery in the region with cabernet franc.

And, I leave the final word to Jancis Robinson. She says: "I am not a huge enthusiast of the sexual stereotyping of wines but even I can see that cabernet franc might be described as the feminine side of cabernet sauvignon". She says it is "subtly fragrant and gently flirtatious" ... and ... "whereas cabernet sauvignon has so much more of everything - body, tannin, alcohol, colour ... I have a very soft spot, indeed, for its more charming and more aromatic relative, cabernet franc."

