



*Thomas Cottrell is Bellevue Club's contributing wine columnist and the owner of La Cantina Wine Merchants.*

### THE OTHER CABERNET

Consider the other cabernet—cabernet franc, that is. There's a lot to recommend it.

It is, for instance, an older grape variety than the ever-popular cabernet sauvignon. Genetic evidence developed in 1997 confirms that cab sauv is the result of a spontaneous cross of sauvignon blanc, the white grape, with cabernet franc. This explains why no one mentions the existence of cabernet sauvignon before the end of the 1700s. By that time cabernet franc had long been recognized for producing great wine

in Bordeaux, in tandem with merlot.

It also helps explain why cabernet sauvignon can often taste quite remarkably like either sauvignon blanc or cabernet franc. And we now understand how cab sauv got its name, don't we?

But cabernet franc's virtues are much greater than its role as progenitor of the world's best-known red grape. And its quality is such that it deserves to be known not just as a blending grape—though it does that very well.

In the Medoc and Graves Districts of Bordeaux, cabernet franc averages 15 percent of the blend. To the east, in St. Emilion and Pomerol, the percentage increases to 30. One very famous—and very expensive—property, Ch. Cheval Blanc, is typically two-thirds cab franc.

As a blending grape, franc lends a ripe berry-cherry flavor, along with a touch of plums. It also adds a dried herb/tobacco note to wines, and a touch of bell pepper, not unlike the

scent and flavor of cabernet sauvignon when grown in a cool climate. The result is to add flavors to both cabernet sauvignon and merlot, and to soften the more-astringent cab sauv, while giving firmer structure to merlot.

Cool-climate regions are where cabernet franc excels, because it ripens earlier than cab sauv. So it does extremely well in places like the Loire Valley of France, consistently turning out lively, grapy red wine, even in problematic years.

Back in Bordeaux this early-ripening characteristic lets growers use it as insurance against complete disaster in years when the cabernet sauvignon fails to ripen—or gets rained on late in the season. In California, ripening is not the issue, but winemakers like to add complexity to the often one-dimensional cabernet sauvignon by emulating the blending done in Bordeaux. In fact, the demand for cab franc, especially in the high-end Meritage blends, often exceeds the supply. As a result, the franc is sometimes more expensive than cabernet sauvignon. Go figure.

Here are three of my favorites for you to try:

**2003 Chinook Cabernet Franc**

*Yakima Valley, \$18*

**2002 Apex II Cabernet Franc**

*Yakima Valley, \$16*

**2001 Charles Joguet Chinon  
"Les Petites Roches"**

*Loire Valley, France, \$21*

