

CABERNET FRANC:
WHY THE MOST COMPELLING GRAPE IN THE WORLD IS THE FUTURE
OF THE LIVERMORE VALLEY AND THE LINEAGE WINE COLLECTION

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The wines made from the Cabernet Franc grape, when done correctly, are some of the most fascinating, compelling, and delicious wines in the world. Given how exotic the variety can be, how close to the line of “what is this?!” the wine can be, it is not for everyone. Sometimes overly “green,” and certainly not having the structure of California Cabernet, Cab Franc can take some getting used to. When one realizes how great a partner it is with food, how well it ages, and how hedonistically impactful it is, it is difficult to go back to wines with a fraction of its personality.

The Livermore Valley, one of California’s oldest AVAs, is a perfect viticultural home for the noble Cabernet Franc, and there appears to be a unified movement among its winemakers to showcase the region as the true home of Cab Franc in California.

CABERNET FRANC HISTORY – OLD WORLD

Wine researchers believe the grape that we know as Cabernet Franc traces its origins to the southwest of France. As with the peripatetic nature of most known wines, Cabernet Franc found homes far removed from its birthplace because of its intrinsic quality. In 1631, Cardinal Richelieu brought cuttings of Cab Franc to the Loire Valley. Four hundred years later, this red grape is still at the center of winegrowing in Chinon, Bourgeuil, and Samur Champigny.

In the 1800s, Cabernet Franc emigrated from the Loire south to Bordeaux where it is a staple of Right Bank wines, second only to Merlot in the most important chateaux blends, and to the Left – where it plays an important, if less pronounced role, in the blends of Pauillac, Margaux, and Pessac-Leognan. Today, Cabernet Franc is the sixth most widely planted grape in France, and there are substantial plantings in Italy, Croatia, Hungary, and Bulgaria.

CABERNET FRANC HISTORY – NEW WORLD

The first cuttings of Cabernet Franc arrived in California more than a century ago. California followed the Bordeaux trend of using Cabernet Franc as a blending grape, adding acidity and drive to wines dominated

by Cabernet Sauvignon. It wasn't until the early 2000s that wines dominated by Cabernet Franc began to hit store shelves in the Golden State to any appreciable degree.

While California leads the United States in production of Cabernet Franc, wonderful examples of the grape can be found in practically every appropriate American growing area. Additionally, examples of fine Cab Franc can be found from Chile, Argentina, and Canada, among other regions.

Cabernet Franc has contributed substantially to the world of wines beyond its own noble quality. In 1997, researchers at UC Davis broke open its genetic code to determine that Cab Franc is one of the parents of Cabernet Sauvignon (with Sauvignon Blanc) and Merlot (with Madeleine Noire des Charentes). Without it, the wine world be bereft of some of the most popular and important varieties in the world.

WHY CABERNET FRANC?

Superlative wines are beautiful wines. And beauty in wine comes from the thoughtful balance of wood, acidity, tannin, and fruit. If one of these elements plays too small or too large a role, the wine will lack

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a sense of cohesiveness and deliciousness. In Bordeaux blends, specifically, Cabernet Franc is the engine of the wine; it provides the sense of aliveness and liveness, the length and verve that makes even the biggest and most tannic of this wine type seem fresh and long. As the dominant variety in a blend or as the only grape in the wine, really good

Cabernet Franc is exponentially more graceful, more sinuous, sexier – and without equal in complexity – compared to any other variety. Cabernet Franc is a variety of dimension – breadth of fruit, depth of tannin, and length of acidity. At its best, it compels the wine lover to return to the glass repeatedly as each sip reveals more profound quality and enjoyment.

CABERNET FRANC IN THE LIVERMORE VALLEY

As with most of California, Livermore Valley Cabernet Franc was used mostly in its traditional role as a blending grape. It wasn't until 2006 that Steven Kent Mirassou, under The Steven Kent Winery banner, began making Cabernet Franc offerings that the perfect match between grape and growing area was demonstrated. Climate change is a real thing in wine country. Over the last 10 years temperatures have consistently risen in California, and the wine landscape as we know it today may be radically different twenty to thirty years from now. Winegrowers, anticipating a continuation of the current trend are experimenting with new warm-climate varieties to take the place of current grapes. Even Napa Valley is contemplating a future in which Cabernet Sauvignon is replaced.

The Livermore Valley, given its east-west orientation and proximity to San Francisco Bay is experiencing climate change in a different way. As temperatures rise in the Central Valley, cold air from the

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Bay is drawn through the Valley earlier in the day and at greater speed than in prior years. Vines shut down and don't ripen fruit when it is too windy. Consequently, it takes longer to get fruit ripe. Ghielmetti Vineyard, the finest and most easterly-located vineyard in Livermore Valley, is especially influenced by the wind given its footing at the base of the Altamont hills. Routinely, we are harvesting Cabernet Sauvignon from this vineyard into the second week of November and punching down fermenters

through Thanksgiving.

As increased wind drives harvest dates further into November, the threat of malign weather and low temperatures increase the chances that Cabernet Sauvignon will not fully ripen. These conditions create a counter-intuitive virtuous cycle: Cabernet Franc ripens a week (or more) earlier than Cabernet Sauvignon and thus offers us a great opportunity to harvest physiologically ripe fruit at lower sugar levels (due to the

cold final quarter of the season). As fall finally vanquishes summer, Cabernet Franc, in all its glorious purity and sexiness, is fermenting away at the winery.

While it is indisputably a world-class growing region especially for Bordeaux varieties, Livermore Valley wine country has not thrived the way it should have. Lacking a collective sense of mission and ambition from its existing wineries, Livermore Valley – too – has not quite yet adopted a grape that grows spectacularly well in its climate and that it could, subsequently, “own.” This challenge has lately seemed to be taken up, however. There are more than a dozen wineries that produce Cabernet Franc, and though only about 15 acres of fruit are planted as of this writing, that acreage will nearly double in the next year. The Livermore Valley is in its Cabernet Franc infancy, but it finally appears ready to marry its viticultural inheritance of quality to the knowledge and experience of its winemakers.



THE FUTURE OF CABERNET FRANC IS L’AUTRE CÔTE – BY STEVEN KENT MIRASSOU

It is not often that a winemaker’s philosophy is so beautifully matched to the inherent greatness of a grape. The variety’s complexity, elegance, and life-affirming sexiness is the perfect muse for Steven Kent Mirassou. His overarching goal of making wines that stun with their sense of Beauty and completeness, that provide joy, richness, and an emotional connection between people, finds a transcendent vinous partner in Cabernet Franc. L’Autre Côte – *the Other Shore* – is the Lineage Wine Collection’s brand statement heralding a love for and a devotion to one of the world’s most noble varieties grown in what we expect to be one of its most perfect vineyard areas.