

ST. HELENA STAR/NAPA VALLEY VINTNERS PANEL TASTING

Napa Valley Cult Cabernet (it's not what you think)

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Robin Baggett of St. Helena's Alpha Omega Winery

Tim Carl

Look at the Napa County crop reports and Cabernet Franc is listed top line — the grape garners more dollars per ton today than the valley's iconic Cabernet Sauvignon.

According to the 2018 Napa County Crop Report:

- Cabernet Franc, \$8,505 per ton Cabernet
- Sauvignon, \$7,925 per ton

With five flights of two dozen Napa Valley Cabernet Franc wines available for the St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel to assess last month, it was clear that Cabernet Franc is a phenomenon worth attention.

During the panel discussion, John Skupny, who has been making Cabernet Franc for 26 years under his Lang & Reed label, said, “With the scope of this tasting, it is exciting to see Cabernet Franc become a lead player in the Napa Valley. It is a wine that expresses its own complexities and unique characteristics.”

Robin Baggett, owner of Alpha Omega Winery, said, “It’s more than a blending wine,” explaining that he makes a Cabernet Franc for which some of his clients are willing to pay top dollar.

Michael Martin, general manager of Market Restaurant in St. Helena, agreed, saying, “People who like Cabernet Franc and like to geek out [about wine] are willing to pay the price for it. It has a cult following.”

Alan Viader of Viader Vineyards & Winery, whose family makes a Cabernet Franc under the DARE label, commented, “When it’s done right, it pairs better with food; it’s a little softer” than Cabernet Sauvignon. Alan then discussed the holy grail of Cabernet Franc: its aromatics, spices and a peppery quality. He concluded, “It’s incredible when planted in the right places, and if you don’t over-extract [it] to keep its elegance.”

Karen Cakebread of Ziata Wines also commented on the wine’s affinity with food, calling Cabernet Franc “a companion on the table with food.”

The samples tasted by panelists included both 100% and Cabernet Franc-dominated wines.

Valued for its aromatics and the bright lift it adds to Cabernet Sauvignon in particular, Cabernet Franc is prized in Napa Valley’s sought-after red blends. The grape, however, stands well on its own, with 100% varietal wines showing good tannins for aging; a richly intense color; bright acidity; and a range of red to black fruit flavors, fresh and dried herbs, a touch of violet floral, and toast or sweet baking spices from oak.

The descriptors may sound similar to many Cabernet Sauvignon wines in the Napa Valley, and that would not be overly surprising given that Cabernet Franc is a parent vine to Cabernet Sauvignon, but the former’s particular virtue is in those beautifully vibrant aromatics.

While hang time and wine making influence the final style, Cabernet Franc is still, in general, not as dense or as tannic as Cabernet Sauvignon. It continues to offer the rich, deeply fruited flavors that Napa Valley wine lovers savor.

Should Cabernet Sauvignon lovers be worried? Hardly.

There are 21,747 bearing acres of Cabernet Sauvignon planted in the valley versus 1,096 for Cabernet Franc. But panelists found the Cabernet Francs being made in the valley today are worth seeking out.

Top Cabernet Francs:

Clos du Val 2016 Cabernet Franc Stags Leap (\$100) Bernard Portet's Napa Valley property search more than four decades ago still proves to be a winner today. Portet was tasked with finding a site for what would be Clos du Val, and only four years later, the winery won top placement in the Paris Tasting. While that was a Cabernet Sauvignon, this Cabernet Franc is a stunner: dark black plum and cassis lifted by bright acidity and made complex with lots of herbal and spice notes.

Gibbs Vineyards 2016 Cabernet Franc Napa Valley (\$28) Decades ago, Dr. Lewis Gibbs Carpenter Jr. replaced some orchards on his St. Helena property with grapes. He has since passed away, but his family continues to make wine from the vineyards that the good doctor planted. Grandson Spencer Gibbs Handly learned to drive a tractor at age 5, and now manages the family vineyard. This wine's mouthfilling deep, dark fruits are structured by firm age-worthy tannins but the juicy black cherry and plum flavors are deliciously approachable now. This is an incredible wine for the price.

Palazzo Wine 2016 Reserve Cabernet Franc Los Carneros (\$115) Grammy-nominated music video and television director producer Scott Palazzo was inspired by one of his first wine loves — St. Emilion — when he created Palazzo decades later. His Cabernet Franc from the cooling hills of Carneros shows red plum and red cherry vibrancy with plenty of firm tannins for aging.

Silenus Winery 2016 Cabernet Franc Oak Knoll (\$50) For Silenus, it was rocket science that started this winery's road to winning wines. Bruce Newlan was a noted scientist, who planted grapevines on his Oak Knoll property in 1968. The ownership has changed, but the grapes that once went to Robert Mondavi, Silver Oak and Inglenook now go into wines such as this black cherry fruited Cabernet Franc with layered vanilla and spice.

Pine Ridge Vineyards 2016 Cabernet Franc Napa Valley (\$75) Winemaker Michael Beaulac is not new to winning awards for his wines. At Pine Ridge since 1997, this Cabernet Franc shows his expert hand. Red currant, red cherry, and black cherry fruits are delivered on a silky smooth palate.

Detert Family Vineyards 2017 East Block Oakville (\$175) This \$175 Cab Franc all started with co-founder and winemaker Tom Garrett making the same varietal wine in his basement. And then he went off to work for Turley Wine Cellars and other Napa Valley greats. Also behind this winning wine is vineyard manager Mike Wolf. He is one of those venerable industry guys who knows more than a dozen others put together. Dark cherry, blackberry and black plum are layered by sweet oak (cinnamon, toast) with plenty of sturdy tannins to make this age for years.