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For the selections this month we examine the Cabernet Franc grape variety, as both a solo performer and what it contributes as part of an ensemble. Looking back at previous features, it has been some time since I put the spotlight to this unique variety so this attention is long overdue.

You will often hear winemakers speak of Cabernet Franc as the “feminine” side of Cabernet Sauvignon. In the cooler climates of Europe the variety is popular because it buds a week earlier than Cabernet Sauvignon, and ripens even quicker. For this reason it is favored in cooler spots where Cabernet Sauvignon struggles to evenly ripen.

With the exception of the Touraine region of the Loire Valley, where Cabernet Franc most often stands alone in the wines of Chinon, Bourgueil, Saint-Nicolas de Bourgueil and Saumur-Champigny, it is often used as a blending tool. The peppery, brushy notes bring added dimension to the aroma of a blended wine, and the soft, polished tannins can lessen the effects of the more structured Cabernet Sauvignon. This became very apparent when the Meritage craze started in Napa Valley in the early 1990’s. At the time there was not much Cabernet Franc in planted anywhere in California, so the grapes sold for almost double those of Cabernet Sauvignon. Today most wineries in the valley plant the variety but very few give it star billing. Most wines labeled as Cabernet Franc are the leftovers after the final blend has been made. They are good for selling to wine club members, but rarely does the wine receive the same attention as the winery’s Cabernet Sauvignon.

Since the names are so similar, most consumers are not surprised to learn the grapes are related. The shock to most is that in 1997 scientists determined through DNA evidence that Cabernet Franc is the parent grape of Cabernet Sauvignon, along with Sauvignon Blanc. The research suggests that Cabernet Sauvignon was born in what is today the Basque region of the Pyrenees Mountains, sometime in the mid-1600’s. By comparison, Cabernet Franc is considerably older, with records of production beginning in the 1200’s. What is interesting is that slightly underripe Cabernet Sauvignon, such as many examples from Chile, smell a lot like fully ripe Cabernet Franc. They share a brushy, slightly green note often reminiscent of bell peppers or tomato leaves. This aroma is caused by a high level of pyrazine compounds in the skins. When not properly managed these compounds can very quickly dominate the finished wine. One only has to drink an inexpensive version of Cabernet Sauvignon from Chile to understand how dominant this smell can be.

Fortunately, winemakers and viticulturists figured out in the last twenty-five years that pyrazine compounds degrade in the presence of UV light. This is one of the main reasons why wineries growing Cabernet Sauvignon use “leaf stripping” to put sunlight onto the grapes as they get close to harvest. The process is not complex. Since grape clusters are located at the base of the vine’s cane, all of them are positioned at the top of the trunk in an area called the “fruit zone.” As the grapes get close to harvest, workers go out and strip off a few leaves at the base of the cane, exposing the clusters to direct sun. The advantage is this light is powerful enough to break down the pyrazines so the wines do not taste green. A challenge is that if the weather becomes particularly hot and dry, the grapes may dehydrate, or worse, sun burn. Yes, grape skin like human skin, cannot tolerate excessive sun either. Just like us, the dried and damaged skin will peel, but for grapes this allows bacteria into the flesh, which ruins them. The other down sides can be that sugar levels may skyrocket, due to the evaporation of water in the grapes, and acidity may drop. New World winemakers have many tools available to them in the cellar to fix these problems, which is why this grape is starting to gain popularity as a stand alone variety.

For our first example, the **2015 Antucura Cabernet Franc “Tani Vineyard” (\$20)** we will examine this variety through the lens of the “other” place where this variety is really gaining momentum, the Mendoza region of Argentina. This example walks the fine line of demonstrating varietal correctness, yet with a lush texture that underlies the New World category.

The Antucura winery is a 225 acre vineyard located in the middle of the Uco Valley, near the town of Vista Flores. I had the chance to visit another winery in Vista Flores a few years ago, and their winemaker told me it was the sweet spot for Bordeaux varieties, like Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, in this vast region. This is because the elevation lies at a little less than 3000 feet. The valley rises higher as you travel south, and that is the better area for Malbec and Bonarda.

Despite the new world location this winery has old world roots, being owned by Anne-Caroline Biancheri, and the winemaking is directed by Hervé Chagneau, both French. In addition, they use mega-consultant Michel Rolland, who is not only French but was raised on the right bank of Bordeaux, where Cabernet Franc is more important than Cabernet Sauvignon. The focus of this winery is their flagship blends, but they make a spectacular Cabernet Franc, which is sourced from a single vineyard within their holdings.

When they began planning the planting of their vineyards, Rolland considered the growing conditions for the Tani Vineyard perfect for Cabernet Franc. The soils are a deep loam, heavy with limestone, which creates a low vigor environment for the plant. This means the vine focuses less energy on the growth of the canes, leaves and flowers, and more on ripening the fruit. For Cabernet Franc this is important because high vigor sites can accentuate the stemmy

quality in the grapes. Winemaking is relatively straightforward, with all grapes hand harvested, destemmed and fermented in stainless steel, with total skin contact up to 45 days. The wine was then aged in French barriques for twelve months before bottling.

When the time comes to serve this wine, please decant it for up to an hour before serving. Not only does this allow the bouquet to develop, but the tannins will unwind a bit too. As soon as you swirl this wine around the glass it gives you the dramatic aromas of Cabernet Franc; fresh blackberries, blueberries, violets, green brined peppercorns and pepper jelly. When you take a sip, this wine will push forward with a crunchy presence of fresh berries, with the subtle shade of peppers popping out. The surprise is how much this wine picks up in mid-palate texture as the fruit builds like a wave into the long finish. Drink over the next two to three years with lentils and sausage, pork paté studded with pistachios or the tenderloin recipe below.

My second selection uses Cabernet Franc in a supporting, but obvious role. The **2012 Basel Cellars Claret (\$26)** is a chance to see the grape play a small, but important part in crafting the complexity of the wine. Being the third, and last, feature from this winery in the last six months, I will not bore you with the same details about the growing conditions of the Columbia Valley in Washington State. The allure of one more feature is to present a wine with some bottle age, where the character of the parts is now in perfect harmony. You may not immediately identify Cabernet Franc in bouquet, or on the palate, but its presence will make itself known at the finish.

The blend for this wine is 52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 31% Malbec, 12% Merlot and 5% Cabernet Franc. All of the grapes come from their two estate vineyards and were vinified and aged for 20 months in neutral, French and American oak barrels. This wine was released in 2015, so it has spent two years in bottle, cellared under the winery perfect conditions. As a result it is drinking really well now.

When you open this wine, decant it for a half-hour before serving. The nose immediately blossoms into a rich combination of toasted marshmallows, cooked cherries and blueberries, cloves, cinnamon sticks. At the very last second you should pick up the peppery notes similar to a newly opened box of cigars. That is the influence of Cabernet Franc in the bouquet. Then on the palate this wine shows a deep core of fruit, framed by moderate tannins that stretch it out for a good thirty seconds. Drink this wine with beef chimichurri, steak au poivre or this amazing beef tenderloin recipe with the parsley, cornichon and caper sauce.

### **Beef Tenderloin Roast with Parsley, Cornichon and Caper Sauce**

During my visit to Bordeaux in April, I was reacquainted with French preference for small dill pickles, called cornichons, and their use in many different dishes. Almost as soon as I returned, my brother-in-law texted me to say a new grocery store near him was opening and they had a sale on beef tenderloins for \$3.99 a pound. Soon I was staring at two of them, about 14 pounds in total. I broke them down, and portioned the tapered ends into filets. This left me with the wider end from both, which I sealed as roasts, but not before cooking one, and experimenting with this sauce. The wine choice was a St. Emilion Grand Cru, heavy with Cabernet Franc, and the pairing was marvelous. You could also use the sauce over grilled filets if you want a smaller portion.

- 1 beef tenderloin (5 to 6 pounds),  
thoroughly patted dry**
- 2 tablespoons olive oil**
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt**
- 2 tablespoons coarsely ground black pepper**

#### **Sauce**

- 6 tablespoons minced cornichons, plus 1  
teaspoon brine**
- ¾ cup minced fresh parsley**
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil**
- 2 scallions, minced**
- ¼ cup capers, rinsed and chopped coarse**
- ¼ teaspoon pepper**
- Pinch table salt**

1. Remove tenderloin from refrigerator 2 to 3 hours before roasting. Use a sharp knife to carefully nick the silver skin on the side opposite the tail with shallow slashes at 1 1/2-inch intervals. Tuck tail end under about 6 inches to ensure that the tenderloin roasts evenly and, tie roast crosswise, knotting at 1 1/2-inch intervals.
2. Adjust oven rack to upper middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Set meat on a sheet of plastic wrap and rub all over with oil. Sprinkle with salt and pepper.
3. Transfer prepared tenderloin from wrap to wire rack set on shallow roasting pan. Roast until instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the roast registers about 125 degrees (meat will range from medium-rare to medium in different areas of the roast), about 45 minutes. Let stand for about 30 minutes before carving. (Can be wrapped in plastic, refrigerated up to 2 days, sliced, and served chilled.)
4. Cut meat into 1/2-inch thick slices. Arrange on a serving platter and serve with sauce of your choice.
5. For this sauce, mix all ingredients in a bowl, and serve.