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## Why Winemakers Love Lighter, Food-Friendly Cabernet Franc

Typically less tannic than Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc makes delicious, highly drinkable wines. So why haven't more oenophiles embraced it? These 5 outstanding bottles are a great place to start.



By  
[Lettie Teague](#)  
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A LONG SHADOW Cabernet Sauvignon may be the bigger star. But those in the know will tell you just how easy to love Cabernet Franc can be. LUISA JUNG



**THERE ARE TWO** Cabernets—one famous, one less so. Among winemakers, however, the “other” Cabernet has quite a fan club.

Cabernet Franc is actually the genetic parent of the more-famous Cabernet Sauvignon; both are natives of France and grown in many of the same wine regions around the world. But Cabernet Franc tends to be less tannic and an easier match with food. It's often lighter in body and color, with attractive red-fruit aromas and, sometimes, herbaceous ones as well. A more reliable ripener and less susceptible to rot, Cabernet Franc is better suited to cooler, more marginal climates. It's easy to see why winemakers love the grape.

### A Devoted Following

In the Finger Lakes region of New York, Bruce Murray of Boundary Breaks winery is on a mission to make Cabernet Franc the “necessary second grape.” (The first, of course, is Riesling, the flagship variety of the Finger Lakes.) Murray's belief in Cabernet Franc is so great that he plans to plant another 25 acres of the variety over the next decade in addition to the 15 he's already planted. Judging by the crisp, juicy 2021 Boundary Breaks Vineyard Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc (\$25) that I tasted, Murray is on solid ground with this variety.

Still, though Cabernet Franc is the most-planted red vinifera grape in the region, I found only two Finger Lakes wines when I went shopping for Cabernet Francs. The second, the 2021 Ravines Wine Cellars Cabernet Franc (\$22), was slightly more structured and full bodied, fermented and aged in French and Slovenian oak.

### The Story of a Vintage Revealed

Cabernet Franc gets even more love, or at least more acreage, in Virginia, where it is the single most planted red variety. Maya Hood White, winemaker of Early Mountain Vineyards in Madison,

has made up to six different Cabernet Francs. I bought the 2021 Early Mountain Shenandoah Valley Cabernet Franc (\$30) and was duly impressed by its lush fruit and polished tannins. Fond as White is of Cabernet Franc, she also acknowledged its challenges. “Transparent” was how she put it, meaning that it reveals the place where it’s grown and how it’s farmed, for better or for worse.

François Morissette, winemaker of Pearl Morissette in the Niagara Peninsula region of Canada, has certainly seen the dark side of producing Cabernet Franc. When I commended him on the plush, darkly fruited 2021 Pearl Morissette Racines du Ciel Cabernet Franc Niagara Peninsula (\$43), he described the vintage as “atrocious” thanks to a combination of high humidity, rain and “hot/cold episodes.” He had to pick early and carefully sort the grapes, discarding roughly half to ensure the quality of the wine. But Morissette, who trained in France before returning to his native Canada, ended his dismal report on a philosophical note: “As my old mentors in Burgundy would say, when one knows what one is doing, there’s not such a thing as a bad vintage.”

## A Star in the Loire

**Two Loire Cabernet Francs that particularly impressed me came from subregions known for the grape: Saumur-Champigny and Chinon. The 2021 Château des Chaintres Les Sables Saumur-Champigny (\$22) was a true pleasure. Marked by silky tannins and beguiling notes of red fruit, it’s an easy-drinking wine produced from hand-harvested, organically grown fruit. The winery’s CEO and co-owner, Elisabeth de Tigny Mourot, acknowledged the prevalence of frost in 2021 but credited the wines with “a very nice balance of acidity and vivacity.”**

I did manage to track down a few Cabernet Francs from other parts of the world, though these didn’t make the cut. Among them were a Cabernet Franc from California, where the grape is often treated like Cabernet Sauvignon and oaked accordingly, and a Chilean Cabernet Franc not worth the effort I made tracking it down.

The best wines I found, despite their stories of hardship and struggle, frost and rain, clearly reflected their producers’ belief in and commitment to the grape. From their lips to wine drinkers’ ears. Based on my tasting, what Cabernet Franc could really use is a good public relations team.

## OENOFILE / Cabernet Francs Worth Getting To Know



**1. 2021 Château de Chaintres Les Sables Saumur-Champigny, \$22.** “Charm” is the word that first came to mind to describe this supple red produced from hand-harvested organic fruit at a centuries-old Saumur-Champigny winery. To which I might add “compulsively drinkable.”

**Email Lettie [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com).**