CAN WE BE FRANC?

THE HUDSON VALLEY PREPARES FOR ITS CLOSE-UP —AND CABERNET FRANC IS THE STAR.

Amy Zavatto

The verdant, hilly climes of the Hudson Valley are known and praised for many things. The beauty of its rolling, roiling namesake river; its famed mid-nineteenth century naturalist art movement; its acres of multi-generational fruit orchards and dairy farms; and, lately, as the celebrated place of culinary inspiration for chefs like Dan Barber and Zak Palaccio. But while these lands, just ninety minutes shy of New York City's northern border, can claim the country's oldest, continually operating vineyards and oldest declared winery, the cult of wine has yet to become the calling card of the region's lore and allure.

That might be about to change.

Cabernet Franc, that beautiful, black French grape variety well known for its role in both legendary Right Bank Bordeaux and Loire Valley wines, is proving to be oh-so much more than a liquidy lark here. Not only does the grape seem well at home in the Hudson Valley's cool-climate terroir, but collective work done between the area's grape growers, winemakers, and Cornell University have tamed many of the conundrums that once plagued producers who yearned for success with vinifera.

Now, with a force borne of a few decades of trial, error, and recent promising success, Hudson Valley vintners are ready (and more than able) to stick a flag in the ground for Franc.

DIGGING DOWN

"I'm of Dutch-German descent; I'm not big on failure," laughs Doug Glorie, who with his wife and partner, MaryEllen, opened Glorie Farm Winery in Marlboro in 2004 on the lands they'd been farming since the late 1970s. As for many Hudson Valley winemakers, that notion long translated into growing mostly cold-hearty hybrid grape varieties. But while hybrid grapes like Seyval, Vidal, Baco Noir and De Chaunac have been popular in the tasting rooms, their reach hasn't grabbed the kind of notoriety and respect that vinifera does (think Riesling in the Finger Lakes and Merlot on Long Island).

In spring 2016, the Glories, along with *Hudson Valley Wine Magazine*, co-founded the Hudson Valley Cabernet Franc Coalition, a group of about two dozen area winemakers and grape growers who've committed not just to putting Cabernet Franc front and center for the region, but to having a consistent meeting of the minds on how and where to best grow it. Not only that, but established and new producers alike are keen to plant more: From Millbrook, Whitecliff, Benmarl, and Robibero to Nostrano, Brunswick Winery, and Milea Estate Vineyards, among the many.

"We like to be confident," Glorie says. "We would not be rolling this out if the wines we're making here couldn't stand up to other regions of the world."

Indeed, sip on the Glorie's 2014 Cab Franc from a southeast-facing acre they have planted on their farm, and its bright, juicy raspberry and cherry-scented fruit isn't just something that makes you think, "This is good for the Hudson Valley." It just makes you think, "This is good!" And that's exactly the point.

"You can see that rich, plush velvetiness that the Hudson River Valley gets. They're softer and the oak use has gotten to be much more balanced. As winemakers are becoming more confident in the grapes they're getting from growers or the grapes they're growing themselves, the fruit is really showing through," says Anna Lee Iijima, *Wine Enthusiast* contributing editor specializing in New York wines.

Iijima, who headed up a sold-out seminar on New York Cabernet Franc at the annual NY Drinks NY tasting in Manhattan this past March, has been keeping an eye on the Hudson Valley's progress. "Some of the stuff coming out of the Hudson Valley, like Millbrook, Benmarl, Whitecliff, and Glorie—it's been consistently high-quality. And over the last four to five years, we're really seeing appellation-driven Hudson River Valley region Cab Franc instead of just 'New York' Cab Franc," she offers. "We're seeing a lot more of a regionally focused, appellation-proud representation. And it's really kind of mind blowing."

Indeed, there is no amount of smoke, mirrors, and expensive oak treatment that can make a grape that's not growing well in a region express itself with the kind of purity that wins critical acknowledgment. Science and logic must be behind it. Cabernet Franc from Bordeaux or the Loire Valley in France aren't grown there because it sounds good in a press release; it's the collective land, climate, and know-how that gave birth to some of the greatest wines known to humankind.

"I have a heavier soil similar to the Pomerol region of France. I don't have perfect conditions, but I know renowned wine regions make the best wines from similar conditions," reasons Ryan Selby, assistant winemaker and vineyard manager for Robibero Vineyards in New Paltz. "If the Hudson Valley wants to identify itself with vinifera, it's Cab Franc."

Kristop Brown, head winemaker for Robibero, agrees. "It's not like, oh, it tastes like Loire Valley Cab Franc! It doesn't. And when you drink Cab Franc from California and other new world regions, it loses something. It's big and bold, but that's not what Cab Franc wants to be," he says. "And you know, it's really exciting to be on the ground floor of something."

While members like Michael Migliore, long-time owner with his wife Yancey of Whitecliff Vineyards in Gardiner, might use the word "marketing" in conversation about the Cab Franc Coalition, he and the rest of the group know full well that the notion of a

Announcing the
Hudson Valley Cabernet Franc Coalition

The Hudson Valley Cabernet Franc Coalition (HVCFC) is a group of Hudson Valley winery owners, grape growers, winemakers, and wine industry supporters committed to establishing a Cabernet Franc brand identity for the Hudson River Region. Founded in early 2016 under the umbrella of the Hudson Valley Wine and Grape Association, the Coalition has been quickly gaining wide-spread support from both new and well-established producers.

Simply put, the Coalition's mission is to encourage more vineyard plantings of the Cabernet Franc grape and boost recognition of the Hudson Valley's distinctive Cabernet Franc wines.

Starting this summer, special promotions and events will be announced to promote the region's terroir-driven Cab Francs. Support the Coalition! Take part in these activities and support the efforts of its members to claim Cabernet Franc as the signature grape of the Hudson Valley. Look for updates at www.HVCabFranc.com.

If the Hudson Valley wants to identify itself with vinifera, it's Cab Franc.

—RYAN SELBY, WINEMAKER

region hanging its collective hat on a grape or two isn't just about appearances and outreach; it's about doing the work. Here, that has translated into years and years of experimenting with different clones, rootstock, site selection, barrel treatment, and blending.

One of the main reasons Cabernet Franc ever found a consistent home here is that it's one of the few popular vinifera varieties that can handle the cold weather inherent in Hudson Valley winters. "Cab Franc is heartier—it can handle temperatures to around -9, -10," says Migliore, president of the Hudson Valley Wine and Grape Association (HVWGA). It was something he learned early on when he planted his first vinifera vines—19 acres of Chardonnay, Gamay Noir, and Cab Franc. "The first 10 years, it was like throwing spaghetti on the wall, but if you look at a benchmark like Cheval Blanc," he says of the famed Cab Franc-centric Right Bank Bordeaux, "and ask if that climate is so different from ours, the answer is it's not." What was different, it turns out, is the way Hudson Valley growers were handling Cabernet Franc in the vineyard.

THE KEY TO THE CAB

"For me, it's the main vinifera red that works well consistently," says Lenn Thompson of New York Cork Report, a website that's devoted its content to both celebrating and critiquing the wines from New York State's AVAs. The challenge, Thompson believes, comes in the form of getting even more entirely HRV-grown Cab Franc in the bottle. Indeed, in the past and present, too, it's been necessary to supplement at times with Cab Franc from the Finger Lakes, Long Island, or both. But if recent and soon-to-be plantings, the new Coalition's devotion to the grape, as well as findings on how to best grow Cab Franc in the region prove anything, it's that Hudson Valley AVA-centric versions are on the rapid rise.

While Cab Franc has shown the kind of cold-tolerant vinifera promise in the Hudson Valley that has made producers like Glorie, Whitecliff, and Millbrook (who currently has about seven acres, with three to four more planned for the near future) committed to growing it for decades, issues like killer cold temperatures, struggles with overcropping, and green flavors made the final results a moving target from vintage to vintage. That is, until Cornell University's Cooperative Extension found the fix that appears to have unlocked the Hudson Valley's ultimate potential with the grape.

Instead of the pretty, ripe raspberry and red-berry fruit flavors, certain vintages yielded Cab Francs that, despite longer time left ripening on the vine past their normal harvest point in early October, were not only lousy with green, vegetal notes that left growers scratching their heads, they were put in peril's way by risking exposure to potential frosts as the fall season wanes on.

Enologist Gavin Sachs and a team of Cornell researchers discovered that getting rid of those undesirable green bell pepper notes that have plagued the wines actually didn't have anything to do with the grapes being "riper"; but it did have everything to do with managing the growth of a particular chemical compound in the grape far earlier on in the season.

It was found that methoxypyrines—a difficult mouthful in both name and manifestation—or MPs, can be wrestled under control with more sun exposure on the grapes earlier in their development. Manage your vine's canopy by getting rid of some leaves early in the season and you get rid of those not-so-desired flavors, too. Voilà. "Applying that discovery in the mid-aughts changed the game for me," Migliore, a passionate and careful grower, marvels.

More good news: Using certain rootstock (specifically, that of the native riparia) also helped to boost the potential for

BLIND TASTING NOTES

To kick off the Coalition's long list of initiatives, *Hudson Valley Wine Magazine* sponsored a blind tasting of close to 20 Cabernet Franc wines from producers around the region. The setting for this benchmark tasting was the Gazebo Room at the lushly renovated Best Western Plus in Historic Uptown Kingston, NY, with a distinguished panel of wine experts (clockwise from top right): Steven Kolpan, author and Professor of Wine Studies at the Culinary Institute at Hyde Park, NY; wine writer and educator Wendy Crispell; Hudson Valley Wine Goddess Debbie Gioquindo, organizer of the Hudson Valley Wine and Spirits Competition; and wine and spirits writer/author Amy Zavatto (not shown).

The identities of the wines were not revealed to the tasters until the last wine was reviewed. (See highlights and comments on pages 8–9.) Look for these wines and other Hudson Valley Cab Francs produced by Coalition members to be featured in promotions throughout the year.

PHOTO: Courtesy Glorie Farm Winery

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—ANNA LEE IIJIMA, WINE ENTHUSIAST

staving off the unfortunate effects of cold-snaps by producing vines that ripen a good week to 10 days earlier in the growing season.

Add to that the nuances of clonal selection to zero in on the versions that glean the best color, concentration, and traditional desirable notes from the Valley's glacial silt, slate, and clay soils, and producers can spend more time managing their vineyards than worrying about unnecessary damage control. All of which adds up to an easier decision for Coalition members who want to commit more acres to Cab Franc rather than hybrids. In fact, Cornell's Hudson Valley Research Laboratory in Highland, NY, plans to rip out an acre of experimental grapes and plant it entirely to different clones of Cab Franc to further study how different versions best thrive and express themselves. (See *Talking Terroir* on page 10.)

"The clones available in the last 15 years from [the French research authorities] ENTAV/INRA are a big improvement over those available in the '80s early '90s," says John Graziano, the longtime winemaker for Millbrook. "We have had good success with clone 214 and excellent results with clones 327 and 623."

Migliore has about eight acres of Cab Franc in the ground now, much of it clone 1, although he's moving toward the French clones 327 and 214. He's also designating a portion of the five-acre parcel he recently leased just below Olana, in Columbia County, NY, to the grape, too. At Robibero, Selby has an acre of clone 1, which you can see on the left as soon as you pull into driveway leading to the winery and tasting room. On the right is a new vineyard planted last year of clones 1 and 327. Soon, he'll be adding some clone 312 to the mix, too.

"Those clones are good for controlling vigor and they have medium-sized clusters—you don't want anything too tight because of the crazy humidity," Selby says. "I also wanted to experiment with a few different clone types to see what I like and what I want to plant more of. Different clones can add to the complexity of the blend."

At Benmarl—the oldest continuously operated vineyards in the country, which were purchased by the Spaccarelli family in 2006—one of the area's younger winemaker and vineyard managers, Matt Spaccarelli, has three Cab Franc acres planted on his family's 38 acre farm; two and a half more of clones 214 and 12 went in the ground this spring. His 100 percent estate-grown Cab Francs don't just express a clarity and varietal exactness that makes the grape's nature come through like a clanging church bell, they offer something else; something uniquely, excitingly pure Hudson Valley.

Tasting the 2010, 2012 and 2014 side by side certainly shows the curious tweak of vintage variation and tells that wonderful, nail-biter story of a year in a glass. But they also show that, when grown and cared for thoughtfully and carefully, the particularity of the wines from this region translate into an alert sort of freshness inherent year after year; a clarity and depth of fruit that expresses itself in violets and raspberries; cherries and a gentle peppery quality. And deep beneath the surface, like the land from which is comes, a quiet hum of minerality. This is Hudson Valley Cab Franc. And this is why everyone from pioneers like Graziano, Migliore, and Glorie to the fresh faces like Spaccarelli and Selby are willing to—literally—put stakes in the ground and claim the grape to all the wine-consuming world as one of their own.

"If it were all up to me, I'd plant our whole 38 acres in Cabernet Franc," smiles Spaccarelli, standing with a glass of the 2014 Fjord Cab Franc, his own just-launched label, in his hand, the verdant sweep of the valley breathtaking out the tasting room window just beyond his left shoulder. Perhaps, not in the so very distant future, he will have his wish. ●

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8 GREAT **CAB FRANCS** TO TRY

We'd highly encourage you to grab any Hudson Valley Cabernet Franc you can get your mitts on because, as with any small wine region, the quantities are limited. What follows are notes from the results of *Hudson Valley Wine Magazine's* in-house tasting of nearly 20 from the region. (For a look behind the scenes, see page 6.) These were a few of the group's faves:

ROBIBERO
2013 CABERNET FRANC

The label says "New York State," which might trick you into thinking that this solid offering from winemaker Kristop Brown and assistant winemaker/owner Ryan Selby is an amalgam of grapes from myriad New York AVAs; it's decidedly not. This is 100% estate grown Cab Franc—the first made entirely from Robibero's own fruit, as a matter of fact. The rich, dense, dark fruit here shows the influence of the 2013 vintage with ripe, concentrated notes of blackberry, black plum, raspberry and cocoa.

There's a brawny quality to this wine that makes us excited to see more from Robibero as the vines age (and this wine does, too). The finish is all pepper, spice, and smacking tannins. Only 30 cases were made. Drink now or, better yet, hang on to this one. It's got the stuffing to cellar. $60

BENMARL
2012 CABERNET FRANC
RIDGE ROAD ESTATE
HUDSON RIVER REGION

This outstanding offering from winemaker Matthew Spacarelli shows his trademark restraint and trust in Benmarl's good fruit. Deep, rich ruby in color, the nose on the 2012 starts out a little reluctant, but give it a minute and it will reward you with pretty notes of flowers and dried raspberry, with an undercurrent of wild cedar and pomegranate. On the palate, this wine is alive—nervous and energetic with tart, bright fruit and a finish of baking spice and black pepper. $25

WHITECLIFF VINEYARD
2012 CABERNET FRANC
HUDSON RIVER REGION

There's something about the 2012 vintage that yielded the perfect spot between bright and brooding; Whitecliff's, made by winemaker Brad Martz, is a special one, indeed. It's clear, medium-ruby hue belies the rich, ripe red-plum fruit and flowers on the nose. In your mouth, things get even more interesting: this juicy, nicely balanced wine yields notes of ripe plum, blackberry, tea, and a hum of minerality. And Martz's constant work over the years finding the right barrel program (he's partial to Hungarian) is well-integrated, adding structure and spice but not overwhelming the beauty of the fruit. $23

"Earthy, full-bodied and ageable. Best wine so far!"

"Elegant! A fine example of Hudson Valley terroir."

"Well-made wine with a very enjoyable finish."

WHITECLIFF VINEYARD
2013 CABERNET FRANC
HUDSON RIVER REGION
The warm, dry 2013 vintage shows itself in dense, darker notes, and that's thoroughly, beautifully apparent here in Martz's offering, rife with juicy red plums, blackberry, and dried flowers. The nice, grippy structure here creates a gorgeous foundation to hold all that pretty fruit on the palate, along with notes of black pepper, tea, and streamlined minerality. A keeper that can be enjoyed now and revisited over time. $23

FJORD VINEYARDS
2014 CABERNET FRANC
HUDSON RIVER REGION
This is the first vintage of Spaccarelli's own label, Fjord, although the grapes for now come from the same vineyards as his family's Benmarl label, for which he is also winemaker and general manager. But passion finds a place for all exciting projects, and here Spaccarelli teases out bright, bursting notes of summer raspberry, strawberry, spice, and dried, sweet herbs. That alert, zippy quality in the Benmarl label is here, too, but the 2014 has a juicy, charming, lip-smacking personality that makes this wine disappear like a wave in the river. $25

GLORIE FARM WINERY
2014 CABERNET FRANC
HUDSON RIVER REGION
The nose is like a late-spring hike in the Shawangunk Ridge, with notes of white pine, cedar, and a little cocoa. On the palate, this complex Cab Franc offers up blackberry, green peppercorns, licorice, and sweet tannins, with a sticky, mouth-watering finish of mixed-berries and tea. $19

MILLBROOK
2013 CABERNET FRANC
NEW YORK STATE
Millbrook, who has the most Cab Franc in the ground of any Hudson River Valley winery, saw the potential for this grape early on, and that strong evidence is contained beautifully in this deep, saturated ruby-hued sipper, which also contains about 25% Long Island merlot. Rich, ripe, juicy blackberry notes morph into strawberry, raspberry and black pepper on the palate. This is a brawny, rich Franc that, given some well-deserved time in your cellar, will grow into itself and its tight, tangy tannins. At the price, buy a case and have fun revisiting this one over the next decade or so. $20

ONE TO WATCH:
NOSTRANO VINEYARDS
2014 ESTATE CABERNET FRANC
HUDSON RIVER REGION

For generations, the Trapani family has farmed the fertile lands of the Hudson Valley; you might say fourth-generation farmer and winemaker, Nicholas Bozzo (great grandson of founder, Joseph Trapani) has vines in his veins. The winery was established in 2014, so the estate fruit of that labor is just beginning to make its debut. We were pretty excited about the potential we saw in Bozzo's 2014 Cabernet Franc. Although this wine possesses a little bit of the greenness that growers are working to cast out, the bones are here: clean, beautiful, bright fruit that leads to notes of strawberry and tea. A solid early effort from Bozzo—we are very much looking forward to see what this wine-maker can do down the line!

—AZ

"Good fruit with tingly tannins!"

"A nice balance of fruit and wood. Lovely."

"Lighter style with a good expression of fruit and crunchy acid."

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW FRANC?

When wine drinkers refer to a "Cab," more often than not they are referring to Cabernet Sauvignon, not the Hudson Valley's newly claimed signature grape, Cabernet Franc. Below is a short list of characteristics to help differentiate the two Cabs, adapted from Hudson Valley viticulturalist J. Stephen Casscles's, *Grapes of the Hudson Valley And Other Cool Climate Regions of the United States and Canada* [Flint Mine Press, 2015].

It is now known that Cabernet Franc is one of the parents of both Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, the other parent of Cabernet Sauvignon being the white Bordeaux grape Sauvignon Blanc.

There are several theories on where Cabernet Franc came from, ranging from the Basque area of Spain, further north in Bordeaux, or even further north in the Loire Valley or Brittany.

The big advantage of Cabernet Franc is that it is probably one of the most winter-hardy red vinifera varieties.

Unlike Cabernet Sauvignon, the relatively lean tannin structure and medium body of Cabernet Francs have a very welcoming presence of soft earth, cigar box, and light chocolate.

Wines produced from Cabernet Franc tend to be more herbaceous, lower in tannin, and lighter in color than Cabernet Sauvignon, and have colors of purple and light ruby, as opposed to Cabernet Sauvignon's darker hues.

Its flavor profile, unlike the serious, big, and dank flavors of Cabernet Sauvignon, is far more approachable and aromatic.

Cabernet Franc wines can have many layers of berries, cranberries, some light red cherries, and a round body that makes them interesting to drink over the course of an entire dinner.

Cabernet Franc is also a very good blender that gives more presence and complexity to already complex red grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chambourcin, Chelois, or Chancellor.

The aging potential of Cabernet Franc is good, with lighter ones peaking in three to five years, while more "serious" ones peak in seven to ten years.

The Hudson Valley is uniquely suited to produce both big, complex Cabernet Francs and the kinds of lighter-bodied reds that are currently being made in the Loire Valley. ●

—JSC