

# Purity in Style, and a Qualitative Leap

132 TASTING NOTES

Friday, Jul 04, 2025



James (third from right) and Staff Writer & Critic Brian Freedman (third from left) were joined at Craft restaurant in New York by a number of notable cabernet franc producers, including, from left, front to back, Byron Elmendorf, winemaker at Macari; Max Rohn, CEO of Wölffer; and Russell Moss, GM of Milea. On the right from front to back are Sarah Gummoe, winemaker at Dr. Konstantin Frank; Bruce Murray, co-owner of Boundary Breaks, Oskar Bynke, co-owner of Hermann J Wiemer; and Casey Erdmann, co-owner of Fjord Vineyards.

New York is home to some of the most compelling cabernet franc being produced in the United States. And while the Finger Lakes, Hudson Valley and Long Island have been important sources of the variety for several decades now, cabernet franc has been shining brighter in recent years thanks to the concerted efforts of growers and producers throughout the state.

James Suckling and Staff Writer and Taster Brian Freedman met in Manhattan in early June and conducted one of the largest-ever critical tastings and assessments of cabernet francs in New York. Over the course of 132 wines – with many of the wines tasted at the famed New York City restaurant Craft – it became clear that not only is New York's reputation as a source of terrific

cabernet franc justified, but that important stylistic differences from one region to another, and even among producers within each of them, have emerged.

Among these 132 offerings, six scored 94 and above and 95 wines reached or cleared the 90-point threshold. The best of them are energetic and judicious with their use of wood, allowing purity of fruit to take center stage. Smart producers have also been increasingly employing whole-cluster fermentation, which allows the wines to remain juicier and more dynamic on the palate, especially earlier in their evolution.





The array of New York cabernet francs James and Brian tasted at Manhattan's Craft restaurant.

Since the Finger Lakes in particular tends to be a cooler region, many of the wines from there display a distinctly Loire-like character, with enough herbal and tobacco notes – classic calling cards of the variety in the Loire region, especially in places like Bourgueil and Chinon – to remain fresh and varietally accurate. Cabernet franc from warmer, more moderate Long Island, on the other hand, tends to be riper and less herbal – an accurate evocation of a very different climate.

In general, however, New York cabernet franc is an excellent counterpoint to most West Coast expressions of it, which tend to be riper and higher in alcohol, more along the lines of cabernet sauvignon. The balance and freshness of New York's best, combined with a sparing use of oak, lead to notable brightness and drinkability.

The herbal character of the variety has long been a point of discussion, if not contention, among American cabernet franc producers, with many historically focusing on the ripeness of the fruit as opposed to its tendency toward herbaceousness. But James and Brian agreed that, in general during their tasting, the most compelling cabernet francs were the ones that didn't eschew those tones.

It's also important to note that New York is famously susceptible to significant vintage variation. In general, the 2021s are impressive, with a bit less ripeness but notable focus. 2022 was a ripe year that many producers we spoke with lauded, but the wines tend to need a bit more time to shine; some of them feel unexpectedly diluted in character.

The generous 2023s show a lot of promise. But the fact that the well-defined 2021s stood out highlighted the fact that a focus on freshness, purity and balance is one of the keys to success for New York cabernet franc. Producers across the spectrum have embraced this.

"The transformation has been dramatic," Russell Moss, general manager of Milea Estate Vineyard, pointed out. His [Milea Estate Vineyard Cabernet Franc Hudson River Region Sang's 2022](#), from the Hudson River Region, stood out for its red berry and chocolate notes, all framed by fine tannins.

"We're now in the second generation of premium winemaking in New York," he added. "If you think about the great wine regions of the U.S. – Napa, Sonoma and the Willamette Valley – their founding families started in the late '60s and '70s for Napa, late '70s for Oregon. In New York, our ultra-premium industry really got its start in the mid-1980s, making us about 20 years behind in the development timeline."



James (left) and Brian tasted primarily reds, but there were also a number of notable white, rosé and sparkling cabernet francs, too.



Hermann J. Wiemer head winemaker Fred Merwarth (left) and winemaker Dillon Buckley (right) made one of the top-scoring wines in this report, the Hermann J. Wiemer Cabernet Franc Finger Lakes Magdalena Vineyard 2023.

Now, he notes, “The children and heirs of those pioneering families are taking over, bringing global experience and elevated techniques back to New York. This second generation has studied and worked worldwide, creating the same qualitative leap we saw in Napa and Oregon when their second generations took the helm.”

Producers throughout New York have been placing an ever-greater focus on understanding and expressing the unique character of the places where their vines and wines are grown and produced

“New York State is all about microclimates when it comes to viticulture,” explained Byron Elmendorf, the winemaker at Macari Vineyards, on the North Fork of Long Island. “The majority of the state is marginally suited to growing *vitis vinifera*; it is within unique microclimatic divergences where *vinifera* thrives.”

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Cabernet franc maturing on the vine at Boundary Breaks in the Finger Lakes.

Those differences, from the maritime climate of Long Island to the chill of the Finger Lakes and the lack of moderating water influence in the Hudson Valley, have allowed unique styles to emerge across the state.

“New York has very distinct regions,” said winemaker Roman Roth of Long Island’s Wölffer Estate. “Each has the ability to make delightful cabernet francs of various intensity levels. From elegant and lively to rich and concentrated, they are all still balanced and moderate in alcohol, and make the perfect food companion.”

That stylistic breadth was embodied during our tastings of three wines that show just how diverse cabernet franc is in New York. The [Wölffer Estate Cabernet Franc Long Island Caya 2021](#), for example, is refined with excellent bones and focus; the [Hermann J. Wiemer Cabernet Franc Finger Lakes Magdalena Vineyard 2023](#), one of the co-highest-scoring wines in this tasting report, is complex, crunchy and caressing. And the elegance of the Hudson Valley is nicely embodied in the [Fjord Vineyards Cabernet Franc Hudson River Region 2021](#) and its sophisticated notes of plum, citrus blossom and sandalwood.



A bird's-eye view of Macari Vineyards estate in the North Fork of Long Island. (Photo from @macariwines)

**'Elevated Restraint'**

Top-quality cabernet franc exists throughout the main New York wine regions, and in a range of styles. On average, the wines tasted for this report are mostly in the \$25 to \$60 price range, with a handful of much more expensive offerings. Given the high quality-to-price ratio and growing availability, they are well worth seeking out in restaurants throughout New York.

Today, Milea Estate's Moss explained, "Cabernet franc is now being treated with the same reverence and intention that winemakers have traditionally applied to noble varieties like pinot noir. This elevated approach – what we call 'elevated restraint' – has resulted in truly stunning, expressive wines that honor the variety's complexity rather than trying to make it into something it's not."

To that end, top producers across New York are, in many cases, pulling back on their use of new oak. Bruce Murray, the owner of Boundary Breaks on Lake Seneca in the Finger Lakes, pointed out that the "judicious use of neutral oak barrels may have contributed to improvements in finished wines."





Rick Rainey and Leana Godard of Forge Cellars are making some of the most unique cabernet francs in New York.

Elmendorf, of Macari, summed up his philosophy as “less oak, more nuance,” saying that cabernet franc “has such unique, delicate aromatics, it always fascinates me to see winemakers try to ripen the green elements out of it and then hit it with new oak.”

He added: “In my five years at Macari, we have moved from neutral barrels and 500-liter puncheons to all 500-liter puncheons, to large format. Nearly all of our varietally bottled cabernet franc is now aged in large foudres or concrete eggs.”

All of this adds up to a New York cabernet franc culture that is forging a fascinating identity and building an impressive reputation.

“The evolution has been profound,” Moss noted. “From basic survival in a challenging climate to sophisticated understanding of our unique terroir, the key insight is that succeeding in New York requires embracing our unique conditions rather than fighting them.”

And producers can’t simply “transplant learning from global regions and expect success here,” he said. Instead, “You must understand our specific climate, soils and varieties” to get anywhere.

“If you want to experience ego death, come to New York and make wine. But if you can work in harmony with our terroir, you’ll create wines that are unmistakably New York.”

**– Brian Freedman, Staff Writer & Taster**

**The list of wines below is comprised of bottles tasted and rated by the tasters at JamesSuckling.com. Note: You can sort the wines below by vintage, score and alphabetically by winery name. You can also search for specific wines in the search bar.**