

An Empire of Francophiles

NEW YORK WINEMAKERS HANG THEIR HAT ON “THE OTHER CABERNET”

I RECENTLY ATTENDED a notable Cabernet Franc tasting. No, it was not at a salon in the Loire Valley—I was in midtown Manhattan, and my faulty menu-driven French would not hold me back here. The 35 participating wineries, all from New York, have formed a new group called Cab Franc Forward NY to promote the grape as the Empire State’s flagship red.

Why Cabernet Franc? “It’s great to be known for your Riesling, but you can’t make a living off Riesling,” Bruce Murray, co-owner of Boundary Breaks in the Finger Lakes, explained as I sampled his 2023 Cab Franc—a good value at \$25, redolent of Bing cherries and white pepper-spiced plums. “You need a red wine to round out the portfolio.” New York’s northerly climate is too cool to ripen Cabernet Sauvignon properly but not quite cool enough for Pinot Noir except in the northernmost parts of the state; Cab Franc, by contrast, performs well in the Finger Lakes, the Hudson River Region, and Long Island, the state’s three primary appellations, all of which were represented at the February 4 tasting. There, it tends to produce medium-bodied wines that are lighter and a bit lower in alcohol than Cabernet Sauvignon—attributes suited to today’s “mindful” drinking ethos that also make it more versatile with a wider variety of foods.

Tasting through most of the wines available (even if my French didn’t hold me back, Amtrak delays from Washington, D.C., did), I was hoping to discern regional differences in style. Instead, I concluded that more experienced producers have set a quality standard for others to follow, irrespective of AVA. They include Wölffer Estate and Macari Vineyards on Long Island, Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard and Dr. Konstantin Frank in the Finger Lakes, and Millbrook Vineyards in the Hudson River Region.

PHOTO: MAX FLATOW



▲ **Oskar Byrke, co-owner of Finger Lakes winery Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard, with a bottle of his Magdalena Vineyard Cabernet Franc.**

A winemaking collective called Cab Franc Forward NY recently hosted a tasting to promote the grape as the Empire State’s flagship red.



PHOTO: DAVE MCINTYRE

New York doesn’t have a monopoly on Cab Franc, of course. The grape does well all along the East Coast, most notably in Virginia. There, much of it is blended into Bordeaux-style reds, the Old Dominion’s current specialty, but outstanding varietal examples are available from Barboursville, Breaux, King Family, Keswick, and Michael Shaps. Some standout Cab Francs can also be found amid California’s forest of Cabernet Sauvignons, where their expression tends to be riper and more polished

than it is on the East Coast. John and Tracey Skupny have built their Napa Valley label Lang & Reed on the grape (as well as on Chenin Blanc) since the mid-1990s. Taylor Berkley Boydston of T. Berkley Wines likewise specializes in vineyard-designate Cab Franc and Chenin grown along the Mayacamas mountain range. “I’ve always thought Cabernet Franc is the most democratic grape, because it can grow in a lot of different places and gives a different interpretation wherever it grows,” John says.

But at the Manhattan tasting, there was unbridled excitement for the New York interpretation as well as a glimpse of great things to come in the form of the not-yet-released 2024 vintage—for example a spicy,

refreshing rosé from Apollo’s Praise in the Finger Lakes and a deep, complex, and stunning barrel sample from Wölffer Estate on Long Island’s South Fork. “2024 is like 1945 was in Bordeaux,” Roman Roth, Wölffer’s winemaker, said to anyone within earshot. “We had three months without a drop of rain—unheard of!”

You’ll be hearing a lot more about Cabernet Franc in the future, especially as New York winemakers put their best Francs forward. ■