
ARTICLES

The Other Cabernet **"the rise of Napa Valley Cabernet Franc"**

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Lang & Reed offers the least typical and, to me, most interesting Napa Valley cabernet franc. It reminds me of Joguet's "Chene Vert" bottling, about as big as Chinon reds get but still much juicier and more lip-smackin' good than the sterner merloc-franc wines of St-Emilion and its satellite appellations.

The rather unlikely catalysts for an actual cabernet franc movement in Napa Valley where marketing consultant John Skupny and his wife, Tracey, who founded their Lang & Reed label (named after their sons) in 1996. Lang & Reed produces two 100 percent cabernet franc bottlings, one slightly more substantial than the other but both firmly in the Chinon style.

Skupny encountered his first cabernet francs in the Loire during the late 1970s, while eating and drinking his way through France with Tracey after graduating from the Kansas City Arc Institute. He went into the wine business on his return, scarring in retail and progressing through a series of marketing roles at Caymus, Clos du Val, and Niebaum-Coppola. Skupny makes the Lang & Reed wines at Kent Rasmussen's winery, doing everything himself. "That's what happens when you go to art school," he notes wryly.

The original concept, Skupny told me, "was that since nobody was toying with this, we could carve out our own niche, and if somebody said name the top five cabernet francs from California we'd be on the list." I would nominate both Lang & Reed bottlings for the top of the list, not just for their distinctive style and quality but also for the attitude behind them. Skupny looked to Soter for winemaking advice as well. Producing cabernet franc isn't always straightforward. It's known among winemakers for lacking a midpalate, a wine that has fragrance and finish but no body. "That hole in the middle is its main deficiency," says Skupny. "The big question is, how can we develop the middle?"

The answer was a winemaking program that treats the fruit more like pinot noir than cabernet. Its essence is a whole berry fermentation, removing the juice from the skins while it's still sweet into neutral oak barrels, before bottling and release a year after harvest. "The whole idea is to control the tannin levels in the wines,"

Skupny says, "to make something that will come up in a year or so, without having to age it.

The method changes only slightly for Lang & Reed's other wine, Premier Etage, a more sumptuous cuvee which is released about thirty months after harvest. "With that wine we go back to more traditional thought in fermentation and aging, with some extended maceration and maybe one new barrel. But I'm very cautious about wood. Cab franc is almost like pinot noir in its delicacy."