

Why a fragrant cabernet franc is the grape to seek out this autumn

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Cabernet franc is enjoying 'a moment' thanks to its 'scent that soars like larksong' says Victoria Moore CREDIT: RAMIISOL

It used to be that no one made much of a fuss about cabernet franc. The grape's homeland is the Loire, where it is bottled as a single variety and makes wines with a tantalizing scent of redcurrant leaves and woodland berries. It is also found in Bordeaux where, for a long time, it was treated as a relatively unsung blending component.

Now cabernet franc's stock is rising. What I love about it is its perfume – and you don't need much to spot its presence in the bottle. Cabernet franc is famously used in Pomerol, where just a few percentage points in the blend has the power to lift the wine with a scent that soars like larksong.

It's used in heftier quantities by cult St Emilion producer Tertre Rôteboeuf (usually about 20% cabernet franc) while at Château Cheval Blanc, also in St Emilion, more than half the vineyard is planted to cabernet franc, which typically makes up around 45 per cent of the Grand Vin.

There are now enthusiastic shouts about cabernet franc emanating from Bolgheri, the wine region in coastal Tuscany that won a reputation for its so-called SuperTuscans – wines made from Bordeaux varieties. You'll find a portion of cabernet franc in Sassicaia and Ornellaia but it's when you taste the pure cabernet franc from Bolgheri that the message really comes across.



Ramiisol consultant Alberto Antonini (on left) and wine grower Robbie Corpora
CREDIT: RAMIISOL

Cabernet franc in Bolgheri is really special – as a wine like Le Macchiole Paleo Rosso 2015 (Lea & Sandeman, £79.50) demonstrates. In South Africa, too, there is more attention being paid to cabernet franc; the grape makes up around a third (depending on the vintage) of the blend of Leeu Passant Dry Red, the new fine wine made by Andrea Mullineux from the fruit of heritage vineyards in Wellington, Franschhoek and Stellenbosch.

Last week I tried a serious cabernet franc from, of all places, Virginia, as the first vintage of Ramiisol Cabernet Franc Riserva 2014 Monticello, Virginia, USA (Raeburn Fine Wines, £155) made its debut on the tasting circuit.

Ramiisol is a new venture set on the slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It's owned by Robert Hefner, whose first career was in ultra-deep gas exploration, and his wife MeiLi. The couple were inspired by a visit to Soldera in Montalcino in the 1990s, bought a property in Virginia, and decided to go for it.



Ramiisol's Cabernet Franc Riserva 2014 is the first vintage from a new venture based in the Blue Mountains of Virginia CREDIT: RAMIISOL

Why cabernet franc? I asked the Robbie Corpora, the Ramiisol winemaker. "Well, first, the cabernet franc was already there. But it's been a favourite of mine since the 2005 vintage in Virginia and I've been standing behind cabernet franc in Virginia ever since.

"People are still running around in Virginia saying, 'This is a great grape for Virginia,' then the next year, 'No, that's a great grape for Virginia.' But I am ready to stop and say cabernet franc is a great grape for Virginia. And we need to focus on it."

Bring on the focus. From Virginia and elsewhere: the more we can see of this beautifully perfumed grape, the better.