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The other Cabernet

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If Cabernet Franc has a pied piper, it might be Aaron Pott. Over the years, the Napa Valley winemaker has quietly taken this

misunderstood grape with him from project to project. When Ron and Anita Wornick planted just under 2 acres on their tiny, priceless jewel of a vineyard in the St. Helena hills above Meadowood, Pott persuaded them to include about 15 percent Franc. He has the spiel down.

"I kind of say it like this: 'Which would you rather taste - a 1961 Chateau Mouton (Rothschild) or a 1961 Cheval Blanc?' " Pott says. "The best expressions of Cabernet Franc are much more interesting than the best expressions of Cabernet Sauvignon."

That is often the minority view. Says John Skupny of Lang & Reed, probably California's sole Franc-focused winery: "It is definitely the Rodney Dangerfield of the varietals." This despite hundreds of years of loyal service in Bordeaux and the Loire Valley.

Blame the flavors. While Franc offers plenty of fruit - usually lighter and leaning more toward raspberry and blueberry than Cabernet's dark notes - notoriety lies with its herbaceous, floral, sometimes peppery side.

When ripe, those notes provide aromatic allure: dried herb, tobacco, graphite and paprika, not just in red wines but also in fine rosés.

But they also can be Franc's weakness - green, underripe, vegetal flavors. These traits provide fodder for critics who cast Franc as a green-lipped wannabe.

Yet winemakers along the West Coast are finally finding a place in their hearts for Cab Franc, either on its own or as a portion of their blends, even in California, where it has remained a perennial problem child. It earns its keep, if nothing else. Statewide, it averages \$1,421 per ton, more than \$300 more than Cabernet Sauvignon, according to 2008 data.

The frequent loathing of Franc has given its partisans - me among them - all the more reason to seek one another out. No secret handshakes, but when a fellow traveler drops the name of, say, Charles Joguet of Chinon, we take it as a badge of refinement.

