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Cabernet Franc Gains Traction in New York Wine Industry

The grape's adaptability and lower alcohol appeal attract consumers, but challenges remain for widespread adoption and global competitiveness.

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Cabernet Franc is gaining attention in New York as a promising grape variety. Known for its adaptability, it is being positioned as a potential star in the state's wine industry. In the U.S., Cabernet Franc is experiencing a surge in popularity, similar to the rise of actress Tilda Swinton. Despite its growing influence, its market impact is still

developing. In California and New York, Cabernet Franc is being cultivated in distinct styles, much like its presence in France's Bordeaux and Loire regions. California's warm climate produces bold, fruit-forward wines, while New York's shorter growing seasons result in lighter wines.

California has about 3,400 acres of Cabernet Franc, a small number compared to the 94,000 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon. However, Cabernet Franc commands higher prices. In 2024, it fetched $2,805.65 per ton, compared to $2,016.85 for Cabernet Sauvignon. In Napa, the price difference was even more pronounced, with Cabernet Franc reaching $11,604 per ton. Livermore Valley has embraced Cabernet Franc as a signature variety alongside Sauvignon Blanc.

In New York, Cabernet Franc is the second-most planted red grape, with 638 acres, primarily in the Finger Lakes, Hudson Valley, and Long Island. Two initiatives, the Hudson Valley Cabernet Franc Coalition and Cab Franc Forward NY (CFFNY), aim to promote the grape. In February, a significant tasting event in Manhattan showcased the variety, attracting wine professionals and enthusiasts.

Cabernet Franc is appealing to consumers seeking wines with lower alcohol content and minimal oak influence. It is often produced by small, family-owned wineries, which many wine lovers prefer to support. Lori Budd, founder of Cab Franc Day and Dracaena Wines, highlights the grape's adaptability and food-friendly nature. The demand for Cabernet Franc is reflected in its rising prices and increased availability of single-varietal wines.

Wölffer Estate Vineyard in Sagaponack has been cultivating Cabernet Franc since 1991. The vineyard plans to expand its plantings to meet growing demand. The CFFNY event in February saw significant interest from consumers and the trade, indicating a rising enthusiasm for the grape.

Cabernet Franc is well-suited to New York's climate, offering resistance to cold and a shorter maturation period. This makes it an attractive option for growers facing unpredictable weather. New York is still exploring optimal rootstock and clonal selections. At Macari Vineyards & Winery, Cabernet Franc sales have doubled since 2017, driven by their sparkling and concrete egg-fermented wines.

Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard in Dundee, NY, has successfully grown Cabernet Franc since 1999. The grape's durability and adaptability make it a good fit for New York's diverse climates. Co-owner Oskar Bynke notes that the grape's cold hardiness and resistance to mold are advantageous in the region's humid conditions.

In Napa, Cabernet Franc thrives in the favorable growing conditions. Laura Barrett, winemaker at Clif Family Winery & Farm, describes it as a rich and ageworthy wine. However, limited availability often leads to quick sell-outs. Dave Parker of Benchmark Wine Group notes that younger collectors are increasingly interested in Cabernet Franc for its unique qualities compared to Cabernet Sauvignon.

Despite its potential, New York Cabernet Franc faces challenges. The state's wines are not yet globally competitive in terms of quality for price. Distribution issues also persist, affecting visibility and availability. Josh Nadel, a master sommelier, points out that California Cabernet Francs often lack the varietal typicality found in New York's expressions.

Retailers are supportive but cautious, as they want to see the wines sell. The industry is currently facing difficulties, and widespread adoption of New York Cabernet Franc will take time. However, there is optimism that demand for local, lower-alcohol wines will drive interest in the Northeast. With only 638 acres planted, New York Cabernet Franc will remain a limited release for now.