



MAX ALLEN

### Full and franc

**C**RUSHED-UP STICKS AND leaves. Five-spice powder. And maybe some little, juicy, prickly black currants. Oh, all right, I admit: this shopping list of taste descriptors sounds a little weird. But these flavours are, truly, what I love about cabernet franc.

Franc, as you know, is a member of the so-called Cabernet Family of red grapes, along with cabernet sauvignon and related varieties merlot, malbec and petit verdot. You often find these grapes blended together to make sturdy, long-lived red wines in places such as Bordeaux and Margaret River and Hawke's Bay. Indeed, in most regions where it's grown, franc is nearly always blended with fuller-bodied varieties because winemakers find it a little lean on its own. Too many crushed-up sticks and leaves.

But those crazy cats in France's Loire Valley are happy to produce snappy, medium- to light-bodied wines solely from cabernet franc – and these wines, for me, are some of the most deliciously thirst-quenching reds you can try. Good examples of Loire cab franc currently available

here (in indie wine merchants and more wine-savvy restaurants and bars) include those from Bernard Baudry, Domaine de la Garrelière and Domaine de L'R.

Franc has been grown in Australian vineyards for many years and some wineries have released straight varietal examples – notably the Redbank Winery in Victoria's Pyrenees, Chalk Hill in McLaren Vale and Woodlands in Margaret River – but while these wines have captured the grape's lovely perfumed black fruit and intensity of flavour, they're not quite sticks-'n'-spice enough for me.

Imagine my delight, then, when I found an Aussie cab franc that is big on perfume and light but juicy in body – just how I like it.

I was visiting the new Ross Hill winery in Orange, NSW, just after vintage in 2009 when winemaker Phil Kearney splashed some raw, just-fermented purple wine into my glass. I stuck my nose in and was bombarded by the most enticing aromas of... what? It was really hard to pin down what this wine smelled like; so unlike any red I'd tried recently. Cloves... allspice... maybe some cinnamon. Hot cross buns? That was it. And some juicy, black currants. And yes: just a hint of crushed-up sticks and leaves. I was very excited – and now I'm even more pleased that the wine has finally been released with all that character and personality intact.

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