

Cabernet Franc Vertical Tasting: 2001 through 2023

Steve Pride, October 7 and 8, 2025

Cabernet franc is one of the world's great wine grapes. In Bordeaux, it is used primarily as a blender both as a support to merlot in the right-bank appellations and to cabernet sauvignon in the left-bank appellations. In the cooler Loire Valley of France, it is the only grape contributing to the red wines from appellations like Chinon, Saumur-Champigny and Bourgueil. Although cabernet franc has been grown in Napa for decades, mainly as a blender that smooths out cabernet sauvignon, its popularity as a stand-alone varietal started to build roughly 15 years ago. In 2001, there were just 11 Napa wineries making a cabernet franc, while in 2021 there were 60 or more. Here at Pride Mountain Vineyards, we have been bottling our Cabernet Franc each vintage since 1993.

The purpose of this tasting is for me to taste through the 23 most recent vintages of our Cabernet Franc between 2001 and 2023 and share my thoughts about how each wine is showing today with recommendations about which vintages can or should be opened today and which will benefit from more time in bottle. I was astonished by how beautiful all the wines are.

The wines were tasted by me solo in two flights across two days, starting with the 2001 and proceeding through to the 2023. A table summarizing my findings can be found at the end.

2001: Enticing tangy flavors of pomegranate, Bing cherry, blood orange and frangipane are made even more interesting by aromatics of sandalwood and fresh-cut flowers. Easy on the attack with sneaky grip still present on the long finish, this wine is fresh and lively. Given its energy, this wine still has time for the tannins to soften a bit more. Even if it has shed the easy sweet cassis fruit of its youth, the 2001 is loaded with complex pleasure and can be opened today with pleasure but will reward more patience as the texture continues to resolve. 93 pts.

2002: Dark pleasing flavors of cassis, ripe black cherry, cedar, earthy forest floor, cigar box and sassafras, this wine combines both hedonism and complexity. A joy to roll in the mouth with its weight on the attack and resolved velvety tannins on the bright energetic finish. Open without hesitation. 96 pts.

2003: Rich and dark, the aromas of pot-pourri and moist tobacco and the extracted flavors of black currants, fig, walnut liqueur and mincemeat exude ripeness. Showing a dense structure with resolving tannins, this wine is quite representative of all our 2003 reds, which is likely the ripest vintage we have ever made. 92 pts with pleasure to be found.

2004: This wine screams Bordeaux! I would never guess this to be from California based on either the aromatics or the texture. Mint, clove, cedar, dried flowers, geranium and pencil shaving frame the pretty cherry fruit in this charmer of a properly aged but still energetic wine. Easy on the attack with soft tannins, this may be the lightest wine in this first flight of 13 vintages but would be considered bold for Bordeaux. The classically styled old-world profile is quite the surprise today! 95 pts.

Postscript: Our red grapes in the warm 2004 vintage were harvested almost a month earlier than normal and at much lower sugar concentration. Although most of our 2004 reds were not fully pleasurable in their first few years in bottle due to that early harvest, they have really improved with age. Today's showing of the 2004 Cabernet Franc displays the characteristics of Brettanomyces, a yeast that converts phenolic compounds in the wine to other "volatile" phenolic compounds (called 4-EP and 4-

EG in abbreviation) that display aromas of Band Aid and clove at lower concentrations and horse barn and even manure at higher concentrations. Most winemakers in California, including us here at PMV, think Brett is a fault, even if many of the great wines in Bordeaux often, but not always, show aromas related to Brett that are appreciated by wine collectors. When subtle like in this bottle of 2004, Brett for sure leads to complexity and charm. But when Brett is present, each bottle can end up with different concentrations of 4-EP and 4-EG with expressions ranging from pleasantly complex to flat-out overwhelming or vulgar. As such, we go to great lengths to prevent Brettanomyces from infecting our wines as they age in barrel. Allowing Brett to grow in your wines is a dangerous game to play and many American palates find Brett to be a fault when it is noticeable at any level, even when its subtle and pretty, like in this particular bottle of 2004 Cabernet Franc. But if I had opened say 6 bottles of this wine, I am sure each would have shown a distinct character due to varying concentrations of 4-EP and 4-EG.

2005: We are fully back in California with gorgeous earthy, dark fruit aromas and flavors of intense black cherry, black currant, sweet tobacco, cedar, subtle espresso and earthy forest floor. The wine is weighty on the attack and persists through a long finish with tannins that are for sure present but resolved and silky. This wine is admittedly on the “huge side” but is aging beautifully and should continue to go for decades. 97 pts today.

2006: The complex retro-nasal aromatics of tapenade, cedar, gardenia, dried tobacco and geranium beautifully frame the ripe dark fruit here. This wine has an easy attack with nice weight, transitioning to tannins that are still resolving but pleasant in an energetic finish. Feels youthful structurally even as the pretty tertiary flavors are emerging nicely. 96 pts today with considerable upside aging potential.

2007: Transitioning toward more youthful wines, this wine is rich, ripe and beautiful. Spot on flavors of dark cherry, black plum, sweet tobacco and forest floor. The structure is bold with weight on the attack and still present but pretty tannins on the finish that make this wine feel youthful. Showing beautifully today even if still on the young side of perfection. But open today without hesitation. 97 pts.

2008: Just gorgeous on the nose, with rich ripe black fruit, earthy nuance, moist tobacco, and very subtle campfire cinder. This wine is quite youthful with a dense attack and still grippy tannin but is providing loads of dark pleasure, even if on the noticeably riper side compared to more recent vintages. The turned-up pretty black currant flavor and full structure will allow this to beneficially age for decades more. 95 pts today.

2009: Another stunner on the nose with ripe black cherry, sassafras, cigar box and subtle mint, the wine shows beautifully in the mouth, with lovely richness in the attack that transitions to a lingering but not excessively tannic finish. For sure still youthful, but this wine is just showing great right now. Open without hesitation. I've always loved our 2009 vintage for all of our reds and this is no exception. 98 pts.

2010: I have never been a big fan of our 2010 vintage across the grape types due to our letting the grapes get too ripe and thus have avoided them at dinners and tastings over the years. But this wine might change my mind! Really pretty, forward flavors of black fruit are made pretty with minerality, subtle jasmine and earthy tobacco. This wine still has some tannin to resolve on the lingering finish but is showing very well. I was expecting not to like it, but you can open it proudly today and it should improve further with another 5 to 10 years in bottle. 93 pts today with aging potential.

2011: The 2011 vintage is the coolest in our 36-year history of growing grapes on our mountain top and this wine is admittedly restrained compared to previous vintages in both its fruit expression and mouthfeel. But man the upside potential feels intense with this wine. The aromatics are a thrill, with great red cherry fruit,

cassis, savory herbs and lovely brown spices, both Indian and Alsatian. In the mouth, the fruit is restrained, showing more tangy blood orange than black fruit or fig, but the complex secondary flavors of juniper and zippy citrus suggest that patience will pay off with this 2011. Although fun to drink today, it has everything required to beneficially age and I would recommend holding onto it for as long as your patience permits. 94 pts today.

2012: This has always been a favored vintage for me, and this Cabernet Franc lives up to expectations! Classic aromatics of ripe cherry and currant along with savory fresh herbs, subtle pepper and frangipane just exude classiness. The retro-nasal flavors are just as expressive with an additional fresh floral nuance showing up. The sublime texture has a rich attack that transitions to an easy resolved finish displaying freshness and energy. Open now without hesitation but enjoy for as long as you would like. A charmer. 98 pts.

2013: Concentrated black cherry, baking spice and sandalwood make this a poster child for our red wines from this era. This comes across structurally like a cabernet sauvignon with loads of slowly building tannin on the long and quite pleasant finish. This has so much stuffing that it should go for decades but is already pleasurable today. If you can hold off, I would give it another few years to allow the tannins to further resolve. But very enjoyable right now, especially if you prefer your reds to be big and full bodied. 96 pts.

This concludes the first flight of 13 wines tasted on October 7. The next 10 wines were tasted the following day.

2014: A big full wine, the 2014 is loaded with pleasure, featuring dark cherry, black currant, nuances of baking spice, sandalwood and a touch of saline or iodine. The wine goes into your mouth with weight and richness that becomes even bigger and more tannic as it progresses into the finish. I would give this one more time to develop more tertiary nuance and to allow the tannins to mellow. Surprisingly, all of our 2014 reds have transitioned from being soft and easy in their youth to bold and big as they go past the 10-year mark in bottle. 95 pts today with upside potential.

2015: So much beauty here, the flavors are refined and the palate is weightless and sublime. If forced to use one word to describe this wine, I would choose “elegant”. As the wine rolls around your mouth there is simultaneously an ethereal lightness and an enveloping richness. Great classic flavors of red cherry, black currant, sassafras, subtle dried lavender and sandalwood. Just a gorgeous cabernet franc that should be opened today without hesitation and that will be a fantastic accompaniment to any meal. Am thinking this is my favorite most resolved and ready cabernet franc so far in this two-day tasting. 98 pts.

2016: Wow, after the pretty 2015, this takes things to a darker and more concentrated place that is simply gorgeous. Lovely complex multi-faceted flavors of ripe plum, cassis, dried violets, sweet summer savory, subtle allspice, cinder, moist tobacco and sandalwood, this just resonates with sultry dark beauty. The mouthfeel is rich on the attack and slowly builds from there without becoming chalky. This is aging beautifully. I love the easy elegance of the 2015, which is likely the most food-friendly wine in today’s flight. But the dark, complex and beguiling 2016 takes things to the next level. 99 pts because no wine can ever be perfect. Enjoy today but this should beneficially age for as long as you will be alive.

2017: Another gorgeous wine, this is driven by both lovely fruit and a surprising structure with richness on the attack that miraculously becomes light and easy on the long lingering finish. The word that describes this effect is “ethereal”, and the 2017 is ethereal in spades. Flavors feature lovely cherry and currant with retro-

nasal aromatics of cigar box and flowers. For sure open now and enjoy this beauty but will hold for as long as you want. Another stunner, 97 pts.

2018: Just amazing that we are going from one beautiful wine to another today. For me, this 2018 is a step up even from the 2016! What makes this one amazing are the complex beautiful aromatics and flavors. Sweet tobacco, dark cherry, cherry pit and violets make this so fun and interesting to smell and taste. Texturally, we are halfway between the 2016 and 2017, which means it is rich and silky from start to finish and oh so ready to enjoy right now. That said this should age forever. I give this 99 pts with it being my favorite of our cab francs tasted so far.

2019: Just another beauty, each of these wines from 2015 onward are gorgeous, and each with their own unique personality. This one has pungent, concentrated, exciting aromas and flavors that thrill with sweet black cherry, currants, sandalwood, Cuban cigar and subtle hints of camphor. It has a bold structure with lovely richness and weight on the attack, a sublime silkiness through the middle and then some sneaky tannins that emerge on the long finish. Would love for you to open this one today to experience its present flamboyance, especially if you like weighty large-scaled reds, but the 2019 will reward aging and can go for decades. 98 pts today with big upside potential.

2020: Entering the final stretch of the tasting, these next younger wines show turned up aromatic intensity and more youthful structure. The 2020 is a classic cabernet franc with tell-tale flavors of black currants, some fresh herbs (but not pyrazine or bell pepper), sassafras and a nice violet note. The wine goes in easy with nice richness but then slowly builds to the point that the tannins are noticeably present on the finish. I would give this more time to allow those tannins to resolve and the flavors to open further. But if you open one today, you will not be disappointed in any way. 96 pts today with loads of aging potential.

Postscript: Decanter magazine tasted through 149 cabernet francs from North and South America in September 2023 and our 2020 Cabernet Franc was their third favorite cabernet franc overall, and their top-rated cabernet franc from North America among stiff competition. And this 2020 is for sure not the best of our Cabernet Francs between 2015 and 2023!

2021: The aromatics are a bit more interesting on the 2021 compared to the 2020. In addition to the sweet dark fruit, there is moist tobacco, forest floor after rain, a bit of blood orange, and fresh flowers. In the mouth, the wine is rich and round with slowly building tannins that do not become grippy as they do on the 2020. I would open this earlier than the 2020 and give it a 97 pt score today that will certainly increase as the years roll by. Again, you will be happy to open one today, but patience will also be rewarded.

2022: Really interesting aromatics that feature sassafras, earthy rich loam, ripe plums, black currants, some potpourri (dried flowers), a hint of butcher block, and a note of black pepper (but trust me, there is no syrah in this blend!). Such a range of turned-up, pretty flavors are indeed super appealing, but what makes this wine a standout right now is the mouthfeel with lovely silky roundness, no chalky tannins and pure lingering pleasure. 98 pts right now with so much aging potential. Of all these recent vintages from 2020 on, I encourage you to open this one first. Superb.

2023: Bottled just 6 months ago, this is already strutting its stuff. Due to its youth, the retro-nasal aromatics are turned up and intense with a flavor range that includes ripe black currants, black raspberry, sassafras, wet forest floor, sandalwood, rosemary bush and violets. Some of the best flavors in this entire 23 vintage lineup. Rich, full and lovely in the mouth, the tannins are still youthful, and you will be happy with each year you can

hold off on this beauty. But I would encourage you to open a 2023 now to appreciate just how flavor-filled and gorgeous this wine is even if it will grow in beauty as it resolves with each passing year. An easy 98 pts today with all that is required to make it to perfection over the years (and decades) to come.

Take away: Our older wines between 2001 and 2014 were made in a riper style and are nonetheless aging nicely and quite pretty with some vintages like 2005, 2009 and 2012 just flat-out fantastic. But our wines made in a lower-alcohol, slightly-less-ripe style from 2015 to 2023 are the clear standouts in this tasting and are, in each of these vintages, stunningly beautiful. Despite an earlier harvest, all of these younger wines have loads of gorgeous fruit. Cabernet franc shows as much fruit as cabernet sauvignon but has a turned-up range of savory and floral flavors that are packaged into a wine showing less explicit chalky tannin compared to cabernet sauvignon. This tasting shows the beauty of cabernet franc as a stand-alone varietal, and why it sells through so quickly each vintage.

Steve's ranking	Vintage	Score	Open or hold	Comments about each of the Cabernet Francs
1	2018	99	open	Can hold for years but please enjoy now. Sublime.
2	2016	99	open	Can hold for ages but it is too intense and beautiful to miss now.
3	2023	98	hold	Could end up being our best ever but its tannins need to resolve.
4	2022	98	open	Sublime and beautiful, check it out today even if it will go for decades.
5	2019	98	hold	Fantastic flavor and structure, ideally let its tannins further soften.
6	2015	98	open	Beautifully resolved finish. Perfect with any meal.
7	2009	98	open	Though still quite youthful, this is gorgeous right now and not to be missed.
8	2012	97	open	Refined and elegant, this is a classic.
9	2021	97	open	This is really lovely today and should continue to get better with time.
10	2017	97	open	An ethereal beauty today, it can be opened any time you want.
11	2005	97	open	Rich, full and "big", this is a stunner.
12	2007	96	open	Youthful, big and rich, this is another beauty from our riper years.
13	2002	96	open	Hedonistic and complex, this is a joy to roll around your mouth.
14	2020	96	hold	Classic cabernet franc flavor, this still has a lot of tannin to resolve.
15	2013	96	hold	Loaded with fruit and complexity, this is still huge and needs more time
16	2006	96	open	Though still youthful in structure, the flavors are really beautiful.
17	2014	95	hold	Surprisingly huge in structure, this beauty needs more time to resolve.
18	2008	95	open	Dark intense flavors combine with youthful structure. Open or hold.
19	2004	95	open	Bordeaux like due to some subtle Brett, each bottle may be different.
20	2011	94	hold	Still coiled and inward, give this more time to open up
21	2001	93	open	Still fresh and lively, although the ripe fruit is less present, its quite lovely
22	2010	93	open	Open or hold, this wine exceeded my expectations and is quite pretty.
23	2003	92	open	Ripest highest-alcohol wine at the tasting, there is still pleasure to be found