

# VINES & WINES: Virginia's Cabernet Francs

VINES & WINES/Jack Berninger

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## Virginia Wine Expo

**When:** Feb. 26-28

**Where:** Greater Richmond Convention Center

**What:** Wine tasting from at least 62 state wineries, food sampling, free crystal wine glass, chef demonstrations at the Whole Foods Market Cheese Pavilion

**Information/tickets:** <http://www.vawineexpo.com>

**Feb. 26 schedule:** 5:30-6 p.m., Governor's Cup awards; 6-10, Grand Tasting presented by SunTrust, \$75 single, \$125 couple; nondrinking, \$25.

**Feb. 27 schedule:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m., Grand tasting, \$35; nondrinking, \$15; 9 p.m.-12:30 a.m., Sparkling and Sweets, \$35; nondrinking, \$20.

**Feb. 28 schedule:** 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Grand tasting, \$35; nondrinking, \$15.

*All tickets are subject to a \$5 processing fee.*

The reputation of Virginia's Cabernet Francs is on the line.

In state vineyards, Cab Franc seems ubiquitous. Numbers back that up; it is the state's most harvested red grape. Wine from these grapes, for the most part, is some of the best produced by state vintners.

But how does it compare to those from elsewhere, specifically those from France's renowned Loire Valley?

That answer could come shortly after corks are popped during a special seminar Feb. 27 at the Virginia Wine Expo at the Greater Richmond Convention Center.

"Cabernet Franc Showdown: Virginia versus France" will feature numerous Cab Francs in a head-to-head comparison conducted by Ross Mattis of Barrel Thief.

By all accounts, Virginia's version should fare quite well.

"As the winery owners and grape growers have improved their practices here, we have seen a huge improvement [in Cab Francs]," said Michael Shaps, one of the state's most-respected winemakers. He produces wines under the Virginia Wineworks label as well as his own label and is a partner in a winery in the Burgundy region of France.

"Overall, I would say that the top five to 10 Virginia producers can go head to head with anyone else in the world."

Bob Kocher, owner of Once Upon a Vine wine shop on MacArthur Avenue in Richmond, agrees and backs his assessment by carrying 10 or more state Cabernet Francs among his extensive Virginia wine inventory.

"The Cabernet Franc grape is the foundation of Virginia's wine industry and one of the first grapes to be grown in Virginia," Kocher said. "It does very well in Virginia's climate and can withstand some of the cold winters we have because it's very hardy."

In the field is where success is determined, or not.

"From a growing standpoint, the heat and length of season here is as long as in the Loire and even hotter," Shaps said. "Cabernet Franc tends to do well in our climate and as long as it gets good sunlight on the skins and is not overcropped, it will have minimal organic compounds in the skins that cause a veggie, bell pepper character.

"In general, my opinion on Virginia Cab Francs is that when they are ripened properly with a respectable crop load, they can outshine Cab Francs from the Loire."

Not all Cab Francs, whether from Virginia or Loire, are gold medal winners.

"There are many excellent Loire Valley Cab Francs, but you can still find some dogs, just like in Virginia," Shaps said.

But improvement continues annually, and some Virginia Cab Francs are being recognized, nationally and statewide. In the recent Governor's Cup red wine competition, Cab Francs won 33 medals, far more than any other varietal or blend in the competition that drew 200 entries from 61 state wineries. Many will be poured at the Wine Expo Feb. 26-28.

Among those on Kocher's shelves is Gray Ghost Vineyards' 2008 vintage (\$21.99), a medalist in recent international (Tasters Guild) and region (Mid-Atlantic Southeastern) competitions.

"It's the best vintage in a few years," Kocher said. "It's 100 percent Cabernet Franc aged in French oak for just under a year. It has rich cherry, raspberry and spice characteristics, a nice blend of fruit and oak flavors . . . and a dry, velvety finish."

The "100 percent" factor may be what puts Virginia's Cab Francs on the medal platform and in people's wine cabinets.

"Virginia's Cabernet Franc is more pure than the French Cab Franc because the French in most cases will blend in another varietal," Kocher said. "It is rare to find a 100 percent Cabernet Franc from France."

So, how do they match up? A showdown, anyone?