

THE KING OF GRAPES

Once local growers begin to reach out to international markets, Cabernet Sauvignon invariably makes an appearance among the vines, just as Starbucks on a local high street indicates property prices are rising, reports Janes Anson.

Cabernet Sauvignon has become the most upwardly mobile of grapes, a key indicator of the advancement of a wine region. But for such an economic powerhouse, its origins are surprisingly humble. For years thought to be an ancient descendant from a Roman vine known as Biturica, its parentage was finally established in 1997, by DNA fingerprinting, as a cross between Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, likely to have happened naturally in 17th century Bordeaux where varieties were routinely mixed alongside each other in the same rows. It would take another century, however, before it emerged as the region's dominant variety.

Its first wave of international popularity arrived shortly afterwards, mainly in Spain and South America, and then again after 1950, when it made inroads in California. Today it can be found from the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon to Coonawarra in Australia, but its natural habitat remains the gravelly soils of the Médoc.

Cabernet today

Although exact figures are hard to establish, it seems likely that plantings worldwide stand at around 170,000 hectares (435,000 acres), or 2% of the world's vines, making Cabernet the second most widely cultivated quality red grape variety. France is the leading producer, and Bordeaux the largest district with almost 20% of the world's Cabernet vines. Overall, the US is the world's third largest producer, with Moldova a surprising second. More specifically, according to sommelier Ron Wiegand,

about 6,000 producers worldwide bottle a Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Sauvignon blend, 750 in the US alone.

Despite its popularity, it is not always the easiest grape to grow. For a start, it is a relatively late ripener, and needs a warm climate to fully mature – one of the many reasons that it's often used in blends. It is also expensive to produce. Although in principle there are few inherent cost differences between varieties, Cabernet is seen everywhere as an export grape, so quality is an issue; yields are restricted to concentrate the flavours, then the resulting wines tend to be aged in oak. To balance the costs, icon wines made with Cabernet come with a hefty price tag.

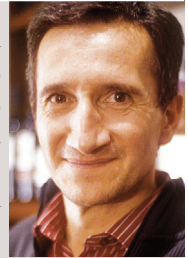
It may be worth paying however, as cheaper Cabernet often cannot compete in taste with other more forgiving varieties – the exception perhaps being Chile, which manages to make good value Cabernet, largely due to its ideal natural climate and old ungrafted vines that suffer from little disease.

Jacques Lurton, producer of wines in Bordeaux, Chile, Argentina, Australia and the Languedoc, says: "In Bordeaux, Cabernet Sauvignon was the most widely planted variety until the 1970s. There was a big shift after that, mainly because of climate (this was before the warming cycle we are now in), when people started to realise that Merlot was ripening 15 days earlier, and was therefore a more reliable bet commercially."

"We have not been able to produce a high-end Cabernet Sauvignon in Languedoc."

Jacques Lurton

Hailing from Bordeaux, Jacques Lurton also makes Cabernet wines in Chile, Argentina, Australia and the Languedoc.



This may be why today in Bordeaux, growers talk Cabernet but plant Merlot. Cabernet Sauvignon stands at 25% of red plantings, a decrease of 1,475 hectares since 2000, while Merlot has risen almost 4,000 hectares to 69,138 – three times that of its more touted sibling.

However, it is the First Growths, most of which have three quarters or more Cabernet Sauvignon, that dominate the image of grape in Bordeaux and are in no small part responsible for the fame of the grape worldwide.

Frederic Engerer, director of Chateau Latour does not doubt that Bordeaux has a special effect on the grape. "Cabernet Sauvignon is still very influenced by its terroir. And the balance that top Bordeaux are capable of producing – this mix of power, richness and freshness – is still to be seen anywhere else."

Napa was the first place to seriously challenge Bordeaux's supremacy, with the 1976 Judgement of Paris tasting. In 2000, Cabernet Sauvignon accounted for almost one third of Napa plants: 10,600 acres from the total 36,000, followed at a distance by Zinfandel and Merlot. In terms of price, in 2001 Cabernet received more per ton than any other variety in Napa – an average of \$3,703 (€2,350) per ton compared to \$2,605 (€1,655) for Zinfandel, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture. In South Africa it is also the most widely planted red grape, followed by



Shiraz. In 2005, plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon decreased by 50% on the previous year's figures - but according to Andre Morgenthal of Wines of South Africa: "Cabernet was widely planted five to ten years ago during the increasing demand for red wine internationally. Today we have reached sufficient plantings to supply the anticipated market growth, with red varieties moving from 25% to 45% of our total." Early examples of South African Cabernet were known for their green bell pepper aromas, having been planted in cool vineyard locations, but today areas such as Simonsberg in Stellenbosch are home to success stories like Kanonkop and Rustenberg. Etienne le Riche in Franschoek is considered one of the country's top producers, sourcing grapes from all over for his small volume, quality driven winery.

In Argentina, the majority of plantings are in the Mendoza region. Growth has been steady due to "export demand, perfect conditions for growing Cabernet, and its ability to blend well with Malbec, the country's signature grape," according to James Forbes of Wines of Argentina. "Malbec is still the star, but Cabernet is very much the precocious youngster." An incentive may again be the higher prices that Cabernet attracts - the average FOB price of Cabernet exported to the UK is \$35.24, while for Malbec it stands at \$26.84. These prices are reversed, however, for exports to the US.

It's not suitable everywhere

There are voices of dissent. In New Zealand, for example, Cabernet has failed to work its charm, while Pinot Noir and Merlot receive all the plaudits. It accounts for just 7% of the red varieties, and the amount planted hasn't altered enormously since 1997. More than 85% of New Zealand's Cabernet plantings are located in the Hawkes Bay region, where the relatively dry climate suits the variety. Michael Daymond-King of Hatton Estate says: "Cabernet is no longer trendy - many contract growers struggle to get the best from the varietal and it is losing popularity with both consumers and growers. As in Bor-

deaux, there are many who struggle in anything other than fantastic vintages, and the cost of production restricts good wines to those winemakers who are dedicated to the cause."

Equally, simply looking for hot climates does not necessarily equal success. In Australia, it's the second-most widely planted red variety after Shiraz, but is rarely associated with the country's wines in the way it is in California or Bordeaux. And even in France, going further south has proved difficult. "My brother Francois and I tried for several years to get really high-end Cabernet Sauvignon from various sites in Languedoc-Roussillon," says Lurton, "but we were never successful."

Deborah Knowland, director of Domaine de Clairac in the Languedoc, agrees, "International varieties such as Cabernet were known for years as *cepages ameliorateurs*, but I believe in fact they reduce the value of Languedoc wines. Today consumers are more inclined to buy wines that have personality, such as old Grenache vines with real history in the area."

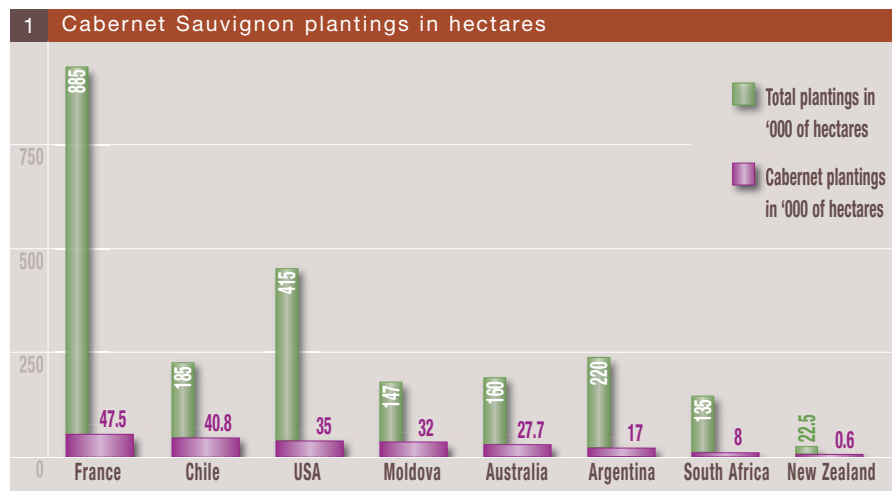
The future for Cabernet

So what's the future for a grape that is often considered to be over-bearing, muscling out indigenous varieties in favour of its commercial allure? There are certainly other contenders on the scene, primarily Pinot Noir and Syrah (Shiraz). While there is still a culture of Bordeaux varietal worship, Eric Asimov

of the *New York Times* recently wrote that many US consumers are becoming bored with the variety, due to overexposure. Lars Sarensen from Cascade Trade in Oregon, agrees. "Our market is growing tired of high priced Washington Cabernet as well as Californian Cabernet. Unless they are designer labels that garner following on the basis of their press, the high price Cabs sit on retail shelves for too long. True wine lovers are looking for different things these days and I think are growing tired of the monster, over-barriqued style of domestic Cabernet."

Steve Smith at Craggy Range in New Zealand sees the problem being more place, not necessarily variety. "There are so many wines made from Cabernet Sauvignon grown in too warm climates that are boring."

Commercially, however, there is plenty of growth left. Last year, exports of Cabernet from Argentina reached nearly 500,000 9-litre cases, up 23.3% on the previous year. And its staid reputation is benefitting from less traditional blending, such as with Shiraz in Australia, Nebbiolo in Italy, Tempranillo in Spain and Malbec in Argentina. A grape that unites growers in such far-flung vineyards as Moldova, Hungary and China has too much invested in it to suffer decline in the short term. James Forbes is confident: "I can't see world demand for the variety slackening and with quality growing, it has a very bright future indeed." ■



SOURCE: MEININGER'S WINE BUSINESS INTERNATIONAL