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## [Why This Bottle, Really?](#)

### Cabernet Franc Finesse from Napa

By [Jesse Dart](#)



**2021 Cabernet Franc, Watson Ranch, Napa Valley, Arnot-Roberts, about \$40.**

Arnot-Roberts is well known for its small production of wines in styles that are becoming more the norm these days — low intervention, fresh, less oak, less need to cellar for years. Cabernet Franc — the other

Cabernet — gets some attention in the US but perhaps not enough. This 2021 from the Watson Ranch, of which Arnot-Roberts produced seven barrels, comes in at a very reasonable and barely perceivable 11.5 percent alcohol, which easily invites you to more than one glass. At least that’s what happened to me on the occasions I’ve had it over a month in fall, including at Thanksgiving. It’s a marvelous celebration wine, holding up to the bird, the gravy, and the garlicky mashed potatoes. I even enjoyed a last glass with pecan pie, liking the way the pie brought out the tartness of the wine. The production is small, but the wine feels priced to be bought, drunk, and enjoyed.

Cabernet Franc has a choice home in the Loire Valley, where it makes the famous wines of Chinon, Bourgueil, and Saumur. But Duncan Arnot Meyers and Nathan Lee Roberts at Arnot-Roberts make a strong case that the variety can thrive and produce an excellent bottle elsewhere, though that, of course, has as much to do with the vineyard, the care given to the process, and the producer’s philosophy as it does with the grape itself.

The Watson Ranch in southern Napa benefits from its proximity to San Pablo Bay and the cooler temperatures that blow in off the water. Combined with a clay soil over limestone, that helps give the wine its acidity and minerality. The Cabernet Franc clone, planted in 2014, came from the Loire Valley rather than Bordeaux or California; it was chosen in hope of complementing the minerality with fruit with more herbal and savory notes.

After a long, slow-growing season, the grapes are picked by hand around the second week of September, and the whole clusters are trod by foot. The fermentation takes about two weeks in an open tank, then the wine is basket-pressed and aged in French oak barrels that are at least five years old. Arnot-Roberts’ aim is to never surpass 13 percent alcohol in its wines. Instead of picking

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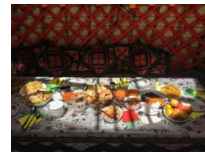
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early, underripe fruit, Meyers and Roberts prefer to find vineyards, like the Watson Ranch, that are cooler and allow for a more extended growing season, so the fruit comes to full ripeness.

When the Cabernet Franc is first opened, the aromas are shy. Then pleasant ripe raspberry and cherry lozenge notes appear, with the lightest hint of herbs at the edges — mainly sage but also mint. The taste is compelling. There's enough acidity to bring the wine to life, but not so much as to give it a harsh mouthfeel. Even with such low alcohol, it is hard to find any hint of sugar; instead, the main impression is ripe cranberry, with enough tannin to keep things interesting. The fruit is never overpowering but upfront (in some Loire bottles it can seem to hide behind greenness).

Many people think that all red wines go with red meat. After having this bottle with both poultry and red meat, I can say that I prefer it with poultry and I suspect it would be great with Peking duck. There isn't quite enough structure to hold up to beef; the wine is almost too elegant. The day after Thanksgiving, I pulled the open bottle out of the fridge. Cold, the wine was very different. The aroma of strawberry jam hit me before I could put my nose in the glass. The acidity had mellowed, but the tannins were more pronounced, giving a yin-yang aspect of smelling sweet but tasting bone-dry. After ten minutes the aroma changed back to cranberry — the strawberry was a fleeting moment.

At around \$40, the price may seem more like what you'd pay for a bottle from the Loire, but Meyers and Roberts aren't trying to imitate but to create something unique and on point — the kind of wine they like to drink, and I like to drink. If you spot their bottle on a shelf, buy it up, get a chicken or order duck from your favorite Chinese restaurant, and see for yourself. ●

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