

There's something confrontational about the set of eyes on the new labels of Melka wines. They stare intensely at you from the bottle, as if daring you to drink it.

## WINE

JORDAN  
MACKAY

The eyes belong to the famous Napa Valley winemaking consultant Philippe Melka, who founded the brand that bears his name with his wife, Cherie, in 1996. Mr. Melka seems anything but confrontational in person, but rather markedly humble and accommodating.

Perhaps the label's steely gaze is in recognition of the implicit gamble behind one of the wines. In a valley dominated overwhelmingly by California's No. 1 red grape, cabernet sauvignon, the Melkas dared, at great personal expense and risk, to plant a vineyard and make wine featuring the oft-maligned varieties cabernet franc and merlot. The 2007 vintage, the inaugural wine from the vineyard, which is named La Mekerra, is to be released soon.

"Cabernet franc is kind of a grape that has somewhat disappeared from Napa Valley," Mr. Melka said in French-accented English. "Merlot, too, though for different reasons. Cab franc because the winemakers didn't like it. Merlot started to disappear because the consumers didn't like it."

Indeed, merlot, viciously blasted in the movie "Sideways," has the reputation of being a gutless crowd-pleaser, while cabernet franc has largely been relegated as a "blending variety." Despite their reputation in Napa, the two are the dominant grapes of Bordeaux's Right Bank — cabernet sauvignon rules the Left Bank — where they make famous wines like Cheval Blanc and Pétrus.

This is the region where Mr. Melka grew up and began his wine career. The promotion of these two grapes can thus be seen as a tribute to his home region, as well as perhaps diversion from the dominance of cabernet sauvignon. After all, it has been heralded Napa cabernets like Seavey, Lail and Gemstone on which Mr. Melka has built his winemaking fame, though he acknowledges that "some people — particularly writers and critics — want to see something different from Napa, not another cabernet sauvignon."

La Mekerra is an attempt to deliver it, with special emphasis

on cabernet franc, the grape on which Mr. Melka based his university studies in Bordeaux.

"Cabernet franc doesn't usually give a large, big-shouldered style of wine, but it can give a lot of purity and length," Mr. Melka said. "The wines can be a little

tannic, and some winemakers feel it's got a vegetal character. But that's only when planted in the wrong place and managed poorly. In the right place it can make incredible wine, extremely seductive and perfumed."

Merlot, he added, serves as a

great complement, adding flesh and bass notes. Cabernet franc's star, in particular, may be on the rise, as Mr. Melka is not the only famous winemaking consultant with an expressed penchant for the grape.

At a recent tasting in San Fran

## A New Look for Two Oft-Maligned Varieties



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN MAXON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Cherie and Philippe Melka in St. Helena, Calif. Their wines feature cabernet franc and merlot grapes, which have slipped from view in the Napa Valley. The labels feature Mr. Melka's gaze.

cisco, Andy Erickson — who makes Screaming Eagle and Ovid, a couple of Napa's most expensive wines — said: "I just love the complexity of cab franc. It has all these exotic aromas like lavender, cumin and Asian spices, as well as great density and richness."

If it's so great, why is there so little of it? Mr. Erickson's wife, Annie Favia, a noted viticulturalist, said that it's not planted very widely, possibly because of the challenge in growing it well.

"To me it's much more difficult to farm than cabernet sauvignon, which by comparison is a piece of cake," Ms. Favia said. "Cab franc is a tricky vine to balance. If you don't thin it enough, the wines will be green and herbaceous. But if you thin it too much, it gets flabby and uninteresting. It's a very tight window to get it right."

Like the Melkas, Mr. Erickson and Ms. Favia make wine together, under the Favia label. Their wine La Magdalena is a cabernet franc-dominated blend that shows off the variety's heady, exotic aromas.

There are other cabernet francs already made in Napa. Rubicon Estate, Francis Ford Coppola's winery, puts out a rich, polished version, and Lang & Reed makes a vibrant wine that cheerfully embraces a touch of the grape's greener edge, a quality I readily enjoy.

But the fact that Mr. Melka and Mr. Erickson, who make some of Napa's most influential wines, are both evangelizing about cabernet franc may herald even wider adoption. "You'll see more of this grape in the future," Mr. Erickson said. "Especially in blends. The secret's getting out."

If it does, that's fine with Mr. Melka.

"Cabernet franc has a bigger role to play in Napa, and merlot is a great match for it," he said, pouring another sip, adding that they are the best varieties for the particular site that he and his wife bought.

"No matter the risk, it's expressing the terroir, the spirit of the place — not the grape varieties — that's important to me," Mr. Melka said, adding with a laugh, "After all, I'm French, and that's what we do." As he laughed, his eyes sparkled and creased, the furthest expression possible from the steely gaze coming from the bottle in his hand.