



Clau de Nell, Anjou (Loire Valley, France) Cabernet Franc 2012



Anne Claude Leflaive, who runs Domaine Leflaive, perhaps the most celebrated producer of white Burgundy, and her husband, Christian Jacques, purchased this domaine in 2008. It's remarkable to see how a woman who made her reputation making some of the world's greatest wines from the Chardonnay grape excels with Cabernet Franc. In a very un-French twist, the appellation, Anjou, is relegated to back label whereas Cabernet Franc is highlighted on the front. The labeling may be unconventional, but the taste is Cabernet Franc at its best. Fully ripe, it conveys the alluring hint of leafy essence that is the hallmark of Cabernet Franc. This mid-weight wine delivers an intriguing herbal character without a trace of greenness. The flavors and tannins caress the palate, they don't bombard it. The overall suaveness allows you to enjoy it now -- perhaps with turkey at Thanksgiving -- but its balance suggests further development with cellaring.

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Clau de Nell, Anjou (Loire Valley, France) "Cuvée Violette" 2012



Here is an example of a wine that far exceeds the reputation of its appellation. Though there are well known appellations for red wines in Loire -- Bourgueil and Chinon spring to mind -- Anjou is not one of them.

But this wine, and its stable mates made by Anne Claude Leflaive and her husband Christian Jacques, shows what talented producers can do even in areas considered down market. Though mostly (70%) Cabernet Franc, the Cabernet Sauvignon (30%) in the blend makes its presence known with firm tannins and broad shoulders. At this stage, the lovely leafy character of Cabernet Franc is in the background, but I suspect that with a few more years of bottle age the marriage will round out nicely. Juicy acidity keeps it fresh and you coming back for more. It would be an excellent choice for a hearty beef dish this winter.

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Clau de Nell, IGT Vin de Pays du Val de Loire (France) Grolleau 2012



The Oxford Companion to Wine notes that Grolleau, a local red grape of the Loire, “produces extremely high yields of relatively thin, acid wine and it is to the benefit of wine drinkers that it is so systematically being replaced with Gamay and, more recently, Cabernet Franc.” Indeed, Grolleau is held in such low regard by regulators that it is not allowed in appellation wines. The authorities will want to reconsider their regulations after tasting this superb bottling. I assume the quality and excitement this wine delivers is from a combination of old vines (60 to 90 years) and the talents of Anne Claude Leflaive. With leafy undertones and hints of ash in the nose, it suggests Cabernet Franc. On the palate its firmness and tannic structure is reminiscent of Cabernet Sauvignon, but without the power of that grape. The combination makes it a wonderfully complex and harmonious wine that intrigues you with its “not just fruit” character. I think it would show best in another couple of years as the tannins round out.