

'FORCE DE LA NATURE'  
THE STRONG  
INFLUENCES BEHIND  
OUR CABERNET FRANC

by Jodie Morlet



Fall Newsletter 2020

ISSUE XIII

L

FRENCH FRANCES

uc represents the fifth generation of a Champagne-growing family, yet Luc's father Eric also wanted his three sons to develop an appreciation for wines from different regions. In 1984, Eric purchased a small property in the Southwest of France. Planted with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, rare autochthonous varieties (Fer Servadou, Duras & Tannat), and Cabernet Franc, this vineyard in Gaillac provided Luc with his first experience working with varieties other than the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes which comprise the family's Grand and Premier Crus Champagnes. Luc helped his father in the vineyards and assisted with crafting the red wines.

In 1989, as Luc was working toward his viticultural degree at the École Viticole de Champagne, he and his classmates traveled to Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil in the Val de Loire. Luc was immediately struck by the unique troglodyte cave houses as well as the beauty of the local castles. The students visited Domaine Couly-Dutheil in Chinon. As Luc tasted the 'Clos de l'Echo' he was amazed by the spicy and peppery character of the Cabernet Franc. This variety, which is believed to have originated in either Bordeaux or the Basque Region, is referred to as *Breton* in the Loire Valley and does well growing in the area's chalky, fine-grained limestone soils.

BURGEONING IN BORDEAUX

Toward the end of his viticultural degree, Luc interned at the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA) in Bordeaux.

He and his fellow interns were invited

to a tasting at Château-Figeac. The largest of all Saint-Émilion estates, it carries the rank of Premier Grand Cru Classé (B) and one-third is planted to Caber-



Luc conducts cooper trials at Château Dauzac, Margaux 1994

*"A tour de force as well as a force de la nature from the Oakville Corridor"*

—Robert M. Parker, Jr.,  
October 2014

net Franc. After departing Château-Figeac, Luc drove to its prestigious neighbor, Château Cheval Blanc, one of only four Saint-Émilion estates to hold the Premier Grand Cru Classé (A) distinction. One half of the vineyard, which borders Pomerol, is planted to Cabernet Franc. During the tour, Luc understood the family's love for this variety, as the guide paused at the top of the staircase for Luc to admire a beautiful botanical watercolor of a Cabernet Franc leaf.

Luc went on to complete a DNO and DESS in Oenology from the Université des Sciences de Reims, followed by an MBA in wine business from École Supérieure de Commerce in Dijon, Burgundy. Upon completion of his graduate studies, he was hired by André Lurton as the *régisseur* for Château Dauzac, a Classified Margaux Growth. Under the guidance of technical director Michel Gaillard and consultant Jacques Boissenot, Luc perfected his skills making red Bordeaux wines consisting of Cabernet Sau-

MORLET  
*Family Vineyards*



vignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot. Still, he longed to craft a wine that would highlight Cabernet Franc. Little did he know that his desire would be realized half a world away.

CALLED TO CALIFORNIA

Luc moved to California in 1996 when he was hired to replace John Kongsgaard as the winemaker at Newton Vineyard. The estate's Cabernet Franc was used as a blending variety in the famous 'Merlot Unfiltered' bottling. Five years later, Luc was selected as the winemaker for Peter Michael Winery, where he continued to work with Cabernet Franc as a blending grape. The 'Les Pavots' Bordeaux-style wine was comprised of two-thirds Cabernet Sauvignon, with the remainder Cabernet Franc, Merlot and a small amount of Petit Verdot. During this time, Luc discovered the tremendous potential of Cabernet Franc from the Oakville appellation when he was introduced to a 1998 'Maya' from Dalla Valle Vineyards. Robert M. Parker, Jr. described the wine, a blend of 55% Cabernet Sauvignon and 45% Cabernet Franc, as an "amazing tour de force in winemaking" and Luc could not have agreed more.

FATHER FRANC

In the 1990s, while a Professor in the Department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of California, Davis, Carole P. Meredith conducted a DNA fingerprinting study. She concluded that Cabernet Sauvignon is the offspring of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, which likely resulted from a spontaneous cross pollination between vines in adjacent vineyards. The leaves of both Cabernet Franc and

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Cabernet Sauvignon are five-lobed, and the berries are small, round and blue-black in color. The clusters of both varieties are small to medium in size, but the Cabernet Franc's winged bunches are elongated and often more compact.

#### SEARCHING FOR A SPECTACULAR SITE

In 2006, Luc and I started the Morlet Family Vineyards label through long-term per-acre leases with growers for our Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs, Syrah and white Bordeaux-style Blend. With the 1998 'Maya' still in mind, Luc was in search for the perfect vineyard in Oakville for our red Bordeaux varieties. Although not quite as difficult to grow as Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc can be finicky. Too rich of an environment causes the vines to be overly vigorous and produce an undesired herbaceousness, but if the soil lacks nutrients and water, the overstressed vines lead to a light-colored jammy wine. Luc believed that the Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard presented just the right soil profile for the vines to gently struggle.

When Luc first met with Andy Beckstoffer in 2007, he explained that he was not interested in signing a long-term lease for Cabernet Sauvignon unless he could also obtain Cabernet Franc. Andy obliged and provided... just one row (0.08 of an acre)! Over the years, our lease grew to a parity between Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Luc chose our Cabernet Franc from the portion of the vineyard planted on Bale Series 104. This clay-loam combination is essential, because the clay increases the water retention capacity of the soil.

In 2015, Luc and I purchased a 24-acre property on the world-renowned Oakville Bench. We named the vineyard 'Cœur de Vallée' which Luc planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and (This should come as no surprise!) Cabernet Franc. Our vines border the banks of the To Kalon Creek and the alluvial fan provides an abundance of well-draining 40-60% gravelly soils. Beginning with the 2018



*Cabernet Franc cluster & leaf from 'Cœur de Vallée' Vineyard, Harvest 2019*



*Cabernet Sauvignon cluster & leaf from 'Cœur de Vallée' Vineyard, Harvest 2019*

vintage, our 'Force de la Nature' derives solely from our 'Cœur de Vallée' vineyard, and Luc could not be happier with the wine which he recently bottled!

#### TO PICK OR NOT TO PICK

Cabernet Franc is more precocious than its offspring. First, it buds at least one week earlier so it is more susceptible to spring frost and shattering. (Rain during the flowering period can prevent proper pollination, resulting in a poor berry set.) Second, it ripens one week to ten days before Cabernet Sauvignon which makes it useful in cooler vintages, especially in Bordeaux, where Cabernet Sauvignon may not reach full ripeness.

Just as important as the *terroir* is the decision of when to pick the Cabernet Franc grapes. If the fruit is picked prior to physiological ripeness, the resulting wine can be spicy

and herbaceous. Likewise, if picked overly ripe, the wine will be jammy and thin on the mid-palate. With such a short ripeness window, Luc sees this picking decision as the most crucial aspect of obtaining the full expression of the varietal. He therefore spends an enormous amount of time monitoring and tasting the fruit to ensure that we are harvesting at the most judicious time.

#### BEYOND A BLEND

For the first few vintages, our Cabernet Franc grapes comprised one-fourth of our 'Cœur de Vallée' Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon and a small portion of our 'Mon Chevalier' Cabernet Sauvignon from Knights Valley. The Cabernet Franc has been a wonderful companion, bringing more linear tannins and structure, as well as elevating the complexity of the bouquets. Still, Luc loved the concept of respecting the amazing singularity of this varietal. In 2010, he felt that the fruit was so exquisite that he wanted to capture it alone. He selected the barrels that shone for their purity and uniqueness and named the

100% Cabernet Franc wine 'Force de la Nature' in honor of his great-grandfather, Gaston Morlet.

#### CRAFTING CAB FRANC

Hand-picked into 35-pound lugs and transported by refrigerated trucks, all of our red grapes are double-sorted, first cluster-by-cluster and then berry-per-berry. Two-thirds of our Cabernet Franc naturally ferment and macerate in small open top stainless steel tanks, while the other third of the fruit is placed in open top Darnajou puncheons called *gueule-bée*. Multiple times each day, the French technique of *pigeage* (punch-downs) is performed in order to procure a gentle, yet efficient extraction of the polyphenols (pigments & tannins). After a long *cuvaison*, the wine is drained into 60-gallon Darnajou barrels to begin its 16-month *élevage*.

As Luc works on the *assemblage* for the 'Cœur de Vallée' and 'Mon Chevalier' Cabernet Sauvignons, he assesses each Cabernet Franc barrel. If the vintage provides barrels which possess truly outstanding character on their own, he sets aside a strictly limited number for 'Force de la Nature.' After the final blend is completed, the 100% Cabernet Franc, as with all of our red wines, is bottled unfiltered and unfiltered to preserve its integrity.



*Cabernet Franc macerates in open-top Darnajou puncheons and small stainless steel tanks*

#### COUP FRANC: SCORING 100 POINTS

Only bottled from outstanding vintages, our 'Force de la Nature' has consistently received the highest praise. Our 2013, 2015 and 2016 vintages were each awarded 100 points, with the 2012 and 2014 vintages coming in just shy at 98 points. Robert Parker exclaimed that this wine is "possibly the finest 100% Cabernet Franc ever made in California" and described it as a "mindboggling" and "ethereal wine that goes beyond just being majestic." He

further affirmed that it is “a tour de force as well as a force de la nature from the Oakville Corridor.” Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW, Editor-in-Chief for Robert Parker’s Wine Advocate, proclaimed that Luc’s “spectacular ‘Force de la Nature’ continues to set the bar sky-high for Napa Valley Cabernet Franc.” Jeb Dunnuck declared that it is “one of the finest expressions of Cabernet Franc out there,” reminding him “of a young 1998 Cheval Blanc.” That is quite an accolade, considering that this very Château was one of Luc’s early inspirations!

Deep garnet-purple in color, ‘Force de la Nature’ is typically characterized by its expressive and complex bouquet of crushed black raspberries and black cherries with spring floral notes over hints of espresso, roasted coffee beans, dark chocolate and touches of pencil shavings and white truffle. Full-bodied with firm structure, this stunning multi-dimensional wine is perfectly balanced on the palate exhibiting a seamless and weightless texture. It boasts elegant and ultra-fine tannins, exhibiting gorgeous layers of vibrant red and dark fruit flavors, floral notes, wet rocks and forest floor with a wonderfully long and earthy finish. ‘Force de la Nature’ ages gracefully for decades.

#### CELEBRATING WITH CHEFS

In fall 2016, Luc and I hosted a wine dinner with three-Michelin-starred Chef Michael Tusk. Our 2013 ‘Force de la Nature’ complemented the incredible Watson Farm Lamb with shelling bean, niçoise olive and mint. The following year, our family was featured as the honorary vintner at Disney’s Club 33 during the 50th anniversary festivities. Executive Chef Andrew Sutton served bone marrow custard with a Kobe beef cheek marmalade alongside our 100% Cabernet Franc wine. Earlier this year, Vincent Darnajou’s annual visit coincided with our 50th birthday celebration. We paired the wonderful cuisine of friend and Bocuse d’Or winning Chef Philip Tessier with the inaugural 2010 ‘Force de la Nature’ and a breathtaking 1982 Château Cheval Blanc! We



*The 2010 ‘Force de la Nature’ & 1982 Château Cheval Blanc mark the special occasion*



*Celebrating our 50th birthdays with Vincent Darnajou and Bocuse d’Or winning Chef Philip Tessier, February 2020*

couldn’t have asked for a more memorable culinary experience to enjoy these two wines.

#### A FRANKLY FANTASTIC FUTURE

Luc originally worked with the Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard because he felt that the

soil would allow him to craft the best wines possible. Even more so, he believes that these extraordinary conditions exist tenfold in our ‘Cœur de Vallée’ Oakville vineyard. The To Kalon Creek meanders through our property, and Luc is so enamored with the surrounding beauty, geological soil profile and quality of the fruit, that he has decided to introduce a new wine to our portfolio which will be released in the spring of 2022. Stay tuned! Until then, we invite you to raise a glass of our ‘Force de la Nature’ and share Luc’s passion for Cabernet Franc! *A Votre Santé!*



*Gaston Morlet*

Auguste Morlet was born in Châlons-en-Champagne to Pauline Morlet. Tragically, he was orphaned as an infant and raised by the nuns of the church. As a young man, Auguste leased a piece of land and planted a vineyard, cultivating vegetables between the vines to sell at the local market. This humble upbringing marks the beginning of the Morlet family’s remarkable history.

Auguste and his wife had three children. In 1888, their eldest child, Gaston, was born in Avenay-Val-d’Or, a small town in the heart of the Champagne region. Strong-willed, hardworking and determined to take matters into his own hands, Gaston became a baker’s apprentice at just ten years of age. He demonstrated extraordinary strength, as he could carry a 220-pound sack of flour on his back. Over the years, Gaston developed a fondness for baking and... for the baker’s daughter! Sadly, due to class differences, the baker did not approve of the union. Not only did he forbid Gaston from courting his daughter, he fired him!

Gaston found love again but was soon drafted for service in *La Grande Guerre* (1914-1918). In 1916, he fought on the front lines in the horrific 10-month Battle of Verdun. French soldiers found him unconscious in the trenches, suffering from frostbite over a significant portion of his body. Miraculously, Gaston survived, and his wife gave birth to their only child, Pierre. Gaston had great dexterity. So, even though he worked

long days, he took a job at night grafting grapevines to help combat the phylloxera epidemic. This additional income allowed him to purchase land and develop Grand Cru and Premier Cru Pinot Noir vineyards.

Standing at 5’10” Gaston was considered a “force of nature” physically, but was also recognized for his intelligence, memory, and street-smarts. With no formal education, Gaston befriended the *préfet*, secured a loan from the local bank and built one of the first cooperative wineries in the region. This gravity-flow facility, named Le Val d’Or, led to Gaston’s desire to leave a legacy. Gaston stopped selling fruit and began to craft Pierre Morlet Champagnes, named in honor of his son.

Decades later, the Morlet family gained independence by building their own cellars and caves, yet they remain involved with Le Val d’Or to this day. Luc’s very first job was making wine at the facility which his great-grandfather had built! Some of Luc’s fondest memories growing up were listening to his grandfather Pierre reminisce about Gaston’s sense of humor, such as the story of Mme. Déhu. She spent her days peering out her front window at the passersby in the village. One day, the neighbor across the street installed a sign in Catalan that read, “Déu vosté garde” (May God bless you). When Mme. Déhu saw Gaston walking by, she summoned him inside and asked what was written on her neighbor’s sign. Gaston couldn’t help but joke, “Déhu vous regarde!” (Watch out! Mme. Déhu is watching you!) Luc inherited his great-grandfather’s knack for puns and will always be thankful for the driving force behind his unwavering commitment to crafting the finest wines.

## Fall 2020 Release



2017

### 'FORCE DE LA NATURE'

OAKVILLE, NAPA VALLEY  
CABERNET FRANC

This wine captures the strong, rich and dense character of the Cabernet Franc grapes from a vineyard on the world-renowned Oakville Bench. Bottled only during outstanding vintages, this massive wine pays homage to Luc's great-grandfather, Gaston Morlet, who had a reputation for being a force of nature in his native Avenay-Val-d'Or. His pioneering spirit remains one of the forces behind our family's passion for making the best wines possible. Crafted from 100% Cabernet Franc grapes, this wine truly is a 'Force of Nature' or 'Force de la Nature.'

**Antonio Galloni 96 points:** *The 2017 'Force de la Nature' is 100% Cabernet Franc from Beckstoffer To Kalon. A gorgeous, large-scaled wine, the 2017 offers a striking mélange of lifted aromatics and deep, pliant fruit. Rose petal, mint, raspberry jam, mocha and blood orange infuse the 2017 with tremendous character and nuance. This is a fabulous expression of Franc. – Vinous, July 2020*



2017

### 'MORLET ESTATE'

ST. HELENA, NAPA VALLEY  
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Our unique estate lies on the western foothills, just north of the town of St. Helena. Shallow loamy topsoil and rocky subsoil of the Hambright series, as well as full sun exposure, create superb conditions for our Cabernet Sauvignon vines. Respecting its historic 1880 charm, we restored the pre-Prohibition stone winery, which is illustrated on the label. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques and reminiscent of a true First Growth, this wine represents the precious memory of a very special place.

**Lisa Perrotti-Brown 95+ points:** *Composed of 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from the "home" estate, very close to Colgin Tychson Hill vineyard, the 2017 'Morlet Estate' sports a very deep garnet-purple color. It strolls nonchalantly out of the glass with carefree, effortless scents of warm cassis, preserved plums, boysenberries and blackberry tart with touches of cigar box, chargrill, lavender and iron ore plus a waft of dried Provence herbs. Medium-bodied, very refined, refreshing and elegant, it has wonderfully ripe, plush tannins and seamless acidity, finishing long and mineral laced. Loads of aging potential here! – Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, December 2019*



2017

### 'MON CHEVALIER'

KNIGHTS VALLEY  
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Located on the foothills of Knights Valley, near Calistoga, our vineyard, comprised of rocky and loamy clay Red Hills soil, benefits from its proximity to Mount St. Helena, whose warm and windy climate is ideal for the long ripening of the red Bordeaux varietals. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques, this special wine is dedicated to our son, Paul Morlet. It is 'My Knight' or 'Mon Chevalier.'

**Antonio Galloni 96 points:** *The 2017 'Mon Chevalier' from a site in Knights Valley, is rich, deep and unctuous, with all of the character*

*that makes wines from this site so exciting. Graphite, inky blue/purplish fruit, spice and lavender infuse the 2017 with tremendous complexity. In the glass, the 2017 is savory, rich and expansive, not to mention hugely appealing. – Vinous, July 2020*



2018

### 'COUP DE CŒUR'

SONOMA COAST  
CHARDONNAY

Each vintage, the tasting of individual lots of Chardonnay reveals a strictly limited number of barrels with truly outstanding features. These selected barrels are then judiciously blended to compose this magnificent cuvée. Handcrafted using classical Burgundian winemaking techniques, this wine represents our 'Heart's Astonishment' or 'Coup de Cœur.'

**Lisa Perrotti-Brown 97-100 points:** *The 2018 'Coup de Cœur' strides boldly out of the glass with classic notes of warm apricots, fresh grapefruit and honeydew melon plus suggestions of crushed nuts, baking bread, honeycomb and cedar. Medium to full-bodied, the palate is quite tightly knit, allowing glimpses of citrus and stone fruit layers and loads of savory sparks, finishing softly spoken yet with fantastic persistence. – Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, December 2019*



2018

### 'JOLI CŒUR'

FORT ROSS - SEAVIEW  
PINOT NOIR

This Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir is made from the very best section of the 'Côteaux Nobles' vineyard, located on the eastern slope of the second ridge from the Pacific Ocean. This great and beautiful (Joli) plot is at the very center of the ranch, its heart (Cœur). Handcrafted using classical Burgundian winemaking techniques, we named this age-worthy wine after the French expression which references the intriguing and attractive character of Pinot Noir. It is the 'Charming Character' or 'Joli Cœur.'

**Lisa Perrotti-Brown 97-99 points:** *The 2018 'Joli Cœur' has a medium ruby-purple color and is a little youthfully mute to begin, soon opening out to reveal amazingly complex notes of Black Forest cake, Morello cherries, black raspberries and wilted roses with touches of dark chocolate, star anise, fallen leaves and loam with a touch of bay leaves. Medium to full-bodied, the palate reveals loads of mineral accents intertwined with the red and black berry flavors, framed by plush tannins and finishing with amazing length and vivacity. – Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, December 2019*

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2018

### 'BOUQUET GARNI'

BENNETT VALLEY  
SYRAH

This wine is made from an exceptional hillside vineyard located in Bennett Valley, where natural conditions are perfect for growing Syrah in the Goulding cobble clay loam soil. As a result of the co-fermentation of three field selections, this wine reveals a complex and spicy bouquet. Handcrafted using classical winemaking techniques of Vallée du Rhône, this unique wine is named after the famous culinary bundle to honor our first relative who emigrated from France to the USA, Abel Pierre Aimé Cou-tanceau, who was a professional chef. It is the 'Garnished Bouquet' or 'Bouquet Garni.'

**Lisa Perrotti-Brown 94-96 points:** *The 2018 'Bouquet Garni' displays a deep purple-black color, bursting onto the scene with bold licorice, plum preserves, fruitcake and sautéed herbs notes plus hints of charcuterie, oolong tea and potpourri. Medium to full-bodied, the palate is firmly textured with ripe, rounded tannins and wonderful freshness, finishing long, lifted and savory. – Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, December 2019*



2014

### 'LA PROPORTION DORÉE'

SONOMA COUNTY  
PROPRIETARY WHITE  
BORDEAUX-STYLE BLEND

We first bottled this harmonious blend of the three classic white Bordeaux varietals in 2015. Now, five years after bottling, the much-anticipated time has arrived for the library release of this unique cuvée, which was inspired from the finest producers of Pessac-Léognan. The Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc and Muscadelle come from dry-farmed vineyards in the Golden State's Sonoma County. Classical winemaking techniques such as *élevage sur lies* (aging on the lees) and *bâtonnage* (stirring) contribute to this true *vin de garde*. As in architectural arts, it is 'The Golden Ratio' or 'La Proportion Dorée.'

**Robert M. Parker, Jr. 100 points:** *A perfect wine is the 2014 'La Proportion Dorée.' The wine is absolutely out of this world. With a light greenish gold color and a killer nose of lanolin, caramelized citrus, honeysuckle, orange marmalade and candle wax, the wine displays great acidity, a magnificent, massive, full-bodied mouthfeel, and seems to come across like a Sonoma County version of a dry Haut Brion blanc. This is a singular wine – profound, compelling, whatever! It should drink well for at least 10 years, if you can resist its early charms. – Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, December 2015*

# MORLET

Family Vineyards

