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Washington's Charles Smith Will Launch an All-Chardonnay Winery

Former rock band manager hires former Efeste winemaker Brennan Leighton to make all Charles Smith wines

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Charles Smith, already one of Washington state's leaders with Syrah, is taking aim at Chardonnay with a new winery project. The straggled-haired Smith, once a rock band manager, bought the former Whitman Cellars facility in Walla Walla earlier this year. He plans to use the 20,000-case winery exclusively for Chardonnay. And he has hired one of the state's most promising winemakers for the new project and his other top wines.

"There are some really good Chardonnays here," Smith told *Wine Spectator*. "We have the soils. We have the cool climate. Let's see what can happen if we create a winery that just focuses on Chardonnay."

Smith already has an impressive lineup of wines. K Vintners, Smith's original winery which he started in 1999, makes a range of single-vineyard Syrahs in Walla Walla. Charles Smith: The Modernist Project, which includes the popular \$12 wines Kung Fu Girl Riesling, Eve Chardonnay and Boom Boom Syrah, currently makes more than 200,000 cases of mostly value bottlings in Washington at the Millbrandt winery in Wahluke Slope. The label also includes small quantities of a \$100 Syrah called Royal City (the 2006 vintage rated 97 points) and a \$100 Cabernet-Syrah blend called King Coal.

To oversee all these wines, Smith has just hired former Efeste winemaker Brennan Leighton. Leighton has had success with Syrah himself. His Efeste Syrah Yakima Valley Jolie Bouche 2008 ranked No. 15 on the *Wine Spectator* 2011 Top 100, and his Efeste Syrah Red Mountain Cedleigh 2006 ranked No. 36 in 2009.

As assistant winemaker at Chateau Ste. Michelle, Leighton has worked on quality white wines as well, including the first vintages of Eroica, the joint venture with Dr. Ernst Loosen of Germany. For the Chardonnay project, Leighton already has his eye on grapes from several high-elevation sites planted with vines more than 30 years old.

"Charles convinced me when he said he wanted to make some of the best wines in the world," Leighton said. "I've been wanting to explore the best sites in the state for Chardonnay for a long time." Efeste's Chardonnays have a silky and harmonious style, using grapes from Evergreen Vineyard, a site Smith uses for his Kung Fu Girl and Eve wines.

Smith, who identifies himself as the company's winemaker, has also given his assistant winemaker, Andrew Latta, full responsibility for the K Vintners wines. "I wanted to reenergize all these wines by getting winemakers to bring their own sense of creativity to them," Smith said. "As we grow, the quality can slip. Instead, I want to raise the bar, especially on the value wines."



K. Stanton

Charles Smith (left) and Brennan Leighton are collaborating on Smith's newest Washington state project.

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Smith is also underwriting separate projects for Leighton and Latta, helping them build their own businesses around small volumes of wines of their choice. Leighton said he plans to make small quantities of Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre from cooler, high-elevation sites.

“Both of these guys have more than a job here,” Smith said. “They have a partnership in the Chardonnay project, and they also have their own businesses. That’s how I hope to keep the best people together.”

Replacing Leighton at Efeste will be Peter Devison, most recently responsible for Precept Brands’ Alder Ridge and Apex wines. Leighton will consult during the transition this year.

Smith has also invested in a new 40-acre vineyard on the cobblestones in Walla Walla, planting Syrah, Cabernet, Grenache and Viognier on the site for K Vintners. Until now, the K wines have all come from purchased fruit.

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Kerry Winslow — San Francisco, California, USA — August 2, 2012 12:46pm ET

This is exciting news!

I had a chance to meet Brennan Leighton and taste through his wines a few years back, and I can tell you he is a true talent and I'm sure he will make some fantastic wines, especially with Charles pushing him! A match made in heaven, I can't wait to see the results! The Efeste Chards and Syrahs were stunning wines, this is going to be fun the watch!

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