

Washington Wines & Wineries

The Essential Guide

By Paul Gregutt

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WASHI WINES &



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The wine business often makes you ponder life's inscrutables. Why is gasoline at four bucks a gallon considered horribly expensive, while beer at \$64 a gallon (been to the ballpark lately?) is worth a half inning's wait in a long line? Why do wineries spend tens of thousands of dollars designing labels that don't last for three vintages, when a guy like K Vintners' Charles Smith can doodle one on a napkin and come up with something so instantly brilliant that you have to slap your head and say, "Why didn't I think of that?"

The label in question is the House Wine that Smith marketed through his Magnificent Wine Company (now a joint venture with Precept Brands): blocky black type on plain white paper; that's it. But it reads "House Wine," and all of a sudden you want it in your house. So does everyone else. House Wine sold 92,000 cases in its first year. Precept is rumored to have spent millions just for the rights to expand and market the brand.

If Smith were simply a marketing genius, it would be enough to be a success in the wine business. But in truth he's got a terrific palate, honed during more than a decade of living in Copenhagen, touring with and managing a number of Danish rock bands. You might imagine that a few bottles of good wine were consumed during that run.

The idea for K Vintners germinated after a chance invitation to a dinner party in Walla Walla led to a friendship with Christophe Baron of Cayuse. Baron encouraged Smith, who had left Copenhagen to open a small wine shop on Bainbridge Island, to try his hand at making wine. Walla Walla seemed like the right sort of place, "a town that thrives on the production of sustenance for people" says Smith. The region's mix of wine and agriculture held enormous appeal. And besides, he adds, "California doesn't need any new wines. You wouldn't move to Little Italy to open up a pizza place. There's a great deal of opportunity here in Washington. You can carve out your future just like in pioneer days."

Carve it out he has. K Vintners makes more different syrahs than any winery in the state, perhaps in the country, and to a bottle they are succulent, delicious, and distinctive wines. His arrival in Walla Walla was timed perfectly, his palate is seemingly infallible, and his friendship with Baron blazed the trail to the best grapes from the best vineyards in the valley, not the least of which were Baron's own pampered plots.

Smith is thoughtful and outspoken, generous and egotistical, innovative and combative. His mind races at full throttle at all times; during a brief conversation he will lay out ambitious plans for new labels, new businesses (he owns a growing portfolio of vintage properties in Walla Walla County), and expansive vineyards.

Above all, his wines have style. The kanji-inspired labels—a stark black slash reads "K" on a plain white background—the silly puns (K syrah indeed!), the quirky, slightly boastful names ("The Beautiful," "The Creator"), and the distinctive, nonmainstream flavors reflect the man himself. "The idea [of my label design] was to communicate the language of wine to people who don't speak wine," Smith explains. "Back in the old days they'd have a brand for their livestock; this is like a brand, 'K.' Once you get it, it's like stepping in gum. It speaks in a language that you can understand."

Smith is quite clear in his vision of what wines, particularly Washington state wines, should be. "All my wines taste like the varietal; they taste like the place they were made from," he opines. "And they are beautifully balanced. That's everything. It's a sensory thing; I'm sensitive to what I want these wines to be like. It's not formulaic. Because year in and out grapes don't give you the same things." Neither does Charles Smith, but you may be sure that whatever he is selling, it will grab you by the throat and it won't let you go.



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