

## Rocking it in Washington

### Charles Smith does wine his way

Bill Daley



With his kinky long hair, omnipresent shades and rebel demeanor, Charles Smith looks more like the rock band manager he once was than a respected winemaker. Yet it's his self-styled "rock" attitude that has earned him a global wine reputation in less than 10 years and helped put the spotlight on wines from Washington state.

Food & Wine magazine's winemaker of the year for 2009, Smith loves all kinds of wine, and you see it in his wide-ranging line, from the kicky Kung Fu Girl riesling priced for easy-sipping at \$12 to his elegant, artisanal takes on syrah, many of which sell for \$100 and up — if you can buy them before they sell out. What unifies his brand, whether it's his top-shelf K Vintners or his more inex-

pensive Charles Smith Wines, are kicky names, eye-catching black-and-white labels and a willingness to push the envelope in ways both wonderful and wacky.

"I get to make wine for a living — how cool is that?" he said. "I get all the wine I can drink, and I get paid. I feel like a kid in the candy store."

You can tell Smith is having loads of fun. Who else (with the possible exception of uber-punster Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon) would focus on syrah and call his winery K, as in "K syrah"? Who else would take a sangiovese and syrah blend, call it "Guido" and slap on a \$40 price tag? Who else would be watching the final scenes of Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill" with his label designer, Rikke Korff, and start to visualize a riesling bottle emblazoned with a faceless Kung Fu girl in full battle stance?

Even what he calls the "un-label" for The Boy, a plain white rectangle with the words "The Boy" printed in small type in the lower right hand corner, has a story. Since this was not going to be a syrah, he wanted to move the wineries signature "K" to the back label. That left the front label unadorned and completely blank. He thought the grenache/syrah blend reminded him of France and Chateauneuf-du-Pape, and that led, in steps, to the name, itself based on a quote by the famed French singer and songwriter Serge Gainsbourg: "I'm the boy who can enjoy invisibility."

Smith has been most definitely not invisible almost from his start in winemaking with K Vintners in 2001. He says he wasn't a total wine novice; he had worked at wineries in his native California and as a sommelier in high-end restaurants.

"If you've eaten a thousand pizzas and you've seen people make pizza but you've never made one yourself, chances are you will be able to make a pretty good pizza," he explained. "Same with wine. The winemakers thought we were just having a conversation. I was taking notes."

Smith chose to work in Washington instead of California because the field wasn't crowded.

"I wanted to be there at the beginning," he said.

Now, Smith is near his 10th anniversary at K Vintners. He's not planning on slowing down.

"I want to make better wine, and I want to do things I haven't done yet," he said. "I want to make the greatest white wine ever produced in Washington State."

He thinks he has it, a single-vineyard viognier, in the barrel now with a target release of fall 2011. If syrah can do so well in Washington, he reasons, why not other Rhone grapes like viognier? So far, he's pleased with the white's progress.

"It's pretty mind-blowing," Smith said.



Smith also plans to focus more energy on the "House White" and "House Red" wines made by the Magnificent Wine Co. He once owned that venture outright, but sold a majority interest to Washington-based Precept Wine Brands. He has stayed on as winemaker.

"I redo the wines and relaunch them," Smith said. "I want to come back with House Red and House White in full force. I want to come back to where the quality is just killer."

Smith also would like to do a television series based on the premise of 50 states and 50 wines. He's not sure what it would entail, but there would be travel and wine. He brushes off any worries of a grueling pace.

"If I can go on tour with six teenagers in a rock 'n' roll band, I can do this," he said.

Always, Smith is looking for that next objective, that next wine that others don't see. His Kung Fu Girl riesling is, to him, a classic case in point.

"I'm proud of Kung Fu Girl. It has such typicity of place, such varietal definition," he said. "We don't give people what they want, we give them what they don't know they want. I am most proud of that wine; it accomplishes that mission."

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## Charles Smith sells good wines and cool labels

Share | Posted by Bill Daley

What's in the wine bottle is the important thing, of course, but a good label – clever, arty, shocking, distinctive, elegant – can certainly enhance the wine experience.

Washington winemaker Charles Smith of K Vintners has got that lesson down. Both the wines and the labels are terrific in both his K Vintners and his less expensive Charles Smith wine lines.

I particularly adore Kung Fu Girl Riesling, shown right. Love the wine, yes, but also the cool label. And what I like is not just the faceless girl in warrior fight stance on the front label but also for the rendering of a rice bowl and chopsticks on the back label to drive home the point that, yes folk, riesling and Asian food play really nice together. That's the way to sell it.

