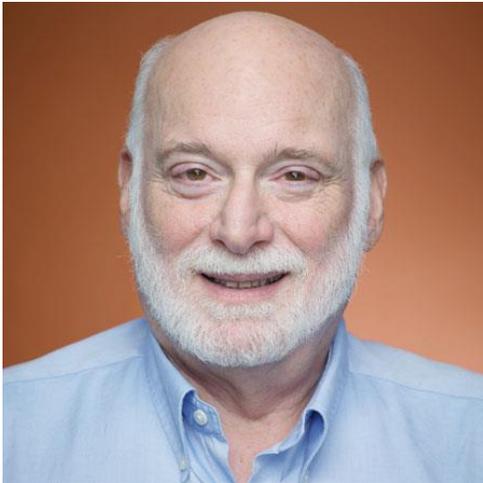


Wine Spectator

Charles Smith Likes It in Seattle

New Jet City winery has tools to up the stakes on wine quality



Harvey Steiman

I walked in on [Charles Smith](#) and winemaker Brennon Leighton as they huddled over a wine barrel at [Smith's new Jet City winery](#) in Seattle. They examined a black mold that was staining the outside of the barrel, and they were happy about it.

"This is alcohol mold," Smith beamed, "the same stuff you see all over the cave walls in Burgundy. It means alcohol is evaporating, not just water. We never saw this in Walla Walla."

Smith and Leighton count this as one benefit of moving the winery from its three different sites around the eastern Washington town to the capacious spaces of a former Dr. Pepper bottling plant across from the northern end of the Boeing Field runway. Starting with the 2015 vintage, this is where Smith is making high-end wines for his [K Vintners](#) and [Charles Smith](#) labels, including Sixto, an impressive new Chardonnay-only project.

"Out in Walla Walla the humidity is so low that alcohol levels concentrate in the barrel," Leighton explained. "The breaking point is 72 percent humidity. Above that, alcohol starts evaporating [faster than water]." A coastal city, Seattle routinely hits that level or higher. Smith hopes to see reductions of 0.2 to 0.4 percent on alcohol levels. This should make for more open textures and clarity in the wines.

The Jet City winery allowed Smith and winemakers Leighton and Andrew Latta to design an ideal winery. Picked in the chill of darkness, the grapes can be rolling into a refrigerated room within 5 hours, where they can hold all day until fermentation. With rows of concrete fermentors and stainless steel tanks and barrel rooms kept at four different temperatures, Smith says, "We have all the tools to take our winemaking up a few levels."

Glass walls separate the cellar from two tasting rooms. "We can take the lid off and show everyone what we do," Smith grinned.

As I tasted through the barrels in the aging cellars, the first wines from a newly planted vineyard in Walla Walla stood out. The site, on Powerline Road south of Walla Walla, lies at 1,200 feet elevation. Smith planted 40 acres on an old riverbed, its soil littered with stones. It's not the same as The Rocks District of Milton-Freewater, farther west, but the wines I tasted have similar characteristics, if in a less overt style. (Smith also makes some wines from The Rocks, so the comparison will be interesting when the 2014s are bottled.)

A Syrah showed a glint of the same black olive flavor that runs through wines from The Rocks, with a spaciousness and transparency that is beguiling. (For those keeping score, alcohol for the Syrah is at 13.8 percent now.) Grenache is especially appealing for its transparency and gorgeously focused dark fruit.

Smith often gets pigeonholed as a smart marketer whose clever labels sell hundreds of thousands of cases. His secret, however, is all the time and effort he spends on vineyards. Powerline is just the latest. The new digs figure to bring out the best in the site over the coming years.