

Rock and Roll and Wine? How Charles Smith is Making Wine Cool Again

He went from managing rock bands to being named "Winemaker of the year".



by Christopher Osburn

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It all started when Charles Smith was a child, trying wine at the dinner table. "Then I started working in kitchens at age eighteen, which meant being surrounded by food and, of course, wine." After that, he spent the next nine years managing rock bands and concert tours throughout Europe, including the famed Danish duo, The Raveonettes.

"Managing a rock band involved juggling a bunch of different projects, navigating a variety of personalities and bouncing from city to city," says Smith. "This is not unlike my life as a winemaker." Spending time in Europe impacted his overall philosophy of business, especially when it comes to the importance of balance. "I'm always working to create a positive, productive environment for those who collaborate with me, whether it's expression through music or wine."

"Managing a rock band involved



Wining and dining while on the road became a catalyst, which ultimately triggered the decisions that have brought Smith to where he is now. “In 1999, I moved back to the United States, specifically to the Pacific Northwest, opening a wine shop on Bainbridge Island, just across the Puget Sound from downtown Seattle.” On a road trip in late 1999, he passed through the small town of Walla Walla and met a young Frenchman and winemaker. “The two of us discovered a common passion for great Syrah and I was eventually convinced to move to Walla Walla and make my own juice.” What started as selling wine out of the back of his Astro van has grown to become the largest independent winery in Washington State.

In 2001, he released 330 cases of his first wine, the 1999 K Syrah. “This initiated the style of classic winemaking that we continue to do today: small lot, single vineyard wines, all of which are hand-picked, foot-stomped, fermented with naturally occurring yeasts and basket pressed.” In 2006 he established the Charles Smith Wines brand and he is currently celebrating the 10th anniversary of the brand this year.



Since its inception, Charles Smith Wines has grown to include K Vintners, Charles SmithWines, ViNO, Secco Italian Bubbles, SIXTO, Wines of Substance, Casa Smith and one-half of Charles & Charles, with more in the works. “Each label brings something unique to table. I started my winery independently and to this day I’m still independently owned and the largest independently owned winery in Washington State.” The brand now sells more than 750,000 cases a year and they reach almost 55,000 people a day or 20 million people a year with their wine. “Our wines are sold in all 50 states and 23 countries.

Beyond the K line, their offerings include:

- Charles Smith Wines, which centers around the trend that most people generally consume wine without delay. “The intent is to create wines to be enjoyed now, but with typicity of variety (Merlot that tastes like Merlot) and true to the place of origin. The wines are full of flavor, balanced, and approachable. The Kung Fu Girl Riesling is one of the top selling Rieslings in the country.”
- SIXTO, their Chardonnay-only label from Smith and Brennon Leighton, his Director of Winemaking. “Inspired by the story of musician Sixto Rodriguez (featured in the acclaimed documentary "Searching for Sugar Man"), we similarly wanted to resurrect something that was always great, but was waiting to be rediscovered as in the old Chardonnay vines in Washington State. Being our sixth brand we created (sextus translates to "sixth" in Latin), the name SIXTO was a perfect fit.”
- The Charles & Charles project is a collaboration between Smith and Charles Bieler of Three Thieves, Bieler Père et Fils, and Sombra Mezcal. “The Charles & Charles portfolio includes a red blend and rosé from Columbia Valley vineyards. With an abstract play on the American Flag, the labels showcase the intent to provoke thought of the future while honoring the past. Our Charles & Charles rose is one of the best-selling across the US.”
- Italian inspired and locally produced, they created ViNO in 2010 with the inaugural release of a 100% Pinot Grigio. Joining ViNO in 2014 was the 100% Sangiovese Rose. “This is in keeping with the vision of producing Italian varietals with the same integrity as they would be produced in Italy. Hand-made wines that are a great value and delicious to drink and we are rolling out our 2015 offerings now.”
- The original thought behind Wines of Substance was to be a one wine brand, with a single minded vision to produce the best value-priced Cabernet Sauvignon in America. “How do you go about this? Traditional winemaking. Natural fermentations. Barrel-aging. Plus, bottling unfiltered and unfinned. In essence, making the wines in small batch winemaking integrity, but doing so on a larger scale.” The wine is black. The label definitively says, "This is Cabernet Sauvignon." “And also, with the CS, you know who made this wine: Charles Smith. Also, there is single vineyard, single expression, Bordeaux varietals (ex: Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot) produced in very limited quantities. And not to forget, the single vineyard Loire-style Substance Sauvignon Blanc.”
- Grower-driven, vintage-dated, pure and fresh, Secco Italian Bubbles truly defines “the dolce vita.” “Growing up in Rome, Italy, Ginevra and Olivia Casa always had an infatuation for Prosecco. In 2010, after the change in laws pertaining to Prosecco production, myself and the Casa sisters jumped on the opportunity to champion both the noble varietals and the growers of Chardonnay and created a new category of sparkling wine called Secco Italian Bubbles.”

- In March they will be unveiling a new line – Casa Smith – which is a collection of wines produced from classic varietals of Italy. “These are the Washington grown grapes from single vineyard selections.”

Drinking wine is about a shared experience, and it relates to many of the major moments in Smith’s life. “I think this is the case with a lot of people. Also, I really enjoy making something from scratch. As a winemaker, I’m really just a glorified farmer and I like making things.”



They have two tasting rooms: the main floor is designed with a rustic Northwest feel, and the larger upstairs space exudes an early ‘60s vibe, with a nod to the aviation industry. “We’ve got a lot going on and invite everyone to come down and check us out.”

Smith considered it a huge honor to win “winemaker of the year”. “I’m always trying to better myself, so while I was honored by the recognition, I was also focused on the next big thing we are working on.” He didn’t get to where he is today by patting himself on the back though. “I’m the Forrest Gump of wine.”