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Forget Napa and Sonoma: Try the New Urban Wineries in Brooklyn, Seattle, and San Francisco

We expect our wineries to be in remote, rural locales, but a new breed of wineries is hitting the city. Fine wines are just a subway or Uber ride away.

We've come to expect our wineries in beautiful, peaceful, almost romantic places. We expect marble, granite, and stone tasting rooms set amongst bucolic grape fields surrounded by mountains, perhaps with a nearby stream or lake.

We do not expect our wineries to be across the street from a busy airfield, to have a train track on one side, or a loud highway on the other. We do not expect to find them amidst a not-quite-yet-gentrified neighborhood full of dive bars, comic book stores and record shops, let alone have a bikini-clad barista coffee kiosk in the parking lot.

But that's exactly the setting of [Charles Smith Wines Jet City](#), an urban addition to the famed winemaker's burgeoning Washington state empire.

This past summer, Charles Smith opened his latest enterprise in Seattle, opting out of the serene tranquility of more remote parts of the state for a city that houses Amazon and Starbucks headquarters.

Why open a winery...*here*?

"I'd already dated the only three single women who live in Walla Walla. So I figured it was finally time to move to Seattle," Smith jokes of his decision.

Smith grew up in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains but moved to Denmark as a young man to manage rock bands and concert tours for groups like The Raveonettes. While in Scandinavia he fell in love with wine and, upon returning to the States, decided to teach himself how to make it. He was nearly 40.

In December 2001, Smith opened K Vintners on farmland first homesteaded in 1853 at the base of the Blue Mountains in Walla Walla, Washington. Within just a few years, Smith was a wine world hit.

In 2009, [Food & Wine](#) named him Winemaker of the Year, and in 2014, [Wine Enthusiast](#) did likewise, making him the only man to win both awards.

"My whole thing is about making wine more accessible," Smith explains.

Now with money and his ambitions of—say it, again—*accessibility*, Smith decided to try and conquer Seattle, which has a metro area of nearly four million people and a serious

amount of tech industry wealth. His Jet City is the largest urban winery on the entire west coast, a stunning 32,000 square feet.

Designed by acclaimed architect Tom Kundig, it's an oddly beautiful space, ultra-modern and sleek as a hip ad agency or graphic design firm.

You can tell it cost a ton to build, though no one will tell me exactly how much. A full wall of glass allows you to watch rich guy private jets take off from Boeing Field across the street—with Mount Rainier in the distance—while you drink at one of two tasting rooms.

For a city slicker like me, this was a heck of lot better than having to spend hours trekking out to Walla Walla—or, say, Sonoma, Napa, the Yakima Valley, even the Finger Lakes. For sure, those are all famously beautiful winemaking locales, but they're not exactly easily accessible by bus, subway, or Uber.

Smith recognized that sticking with picturesque but remote locales not only led to missing out on potential customers, but also potential talent.

“It was hard to get young people—*young single people*—to move to Walla Walla,” Smith tells me, another reason he wanted to shift his winemaking to the big city. He says it's much easier to get new hires to move to Seattle than Walla Walla, a city of 30,000. Smith and his Jet City crew of 17 produce 45,000 cases of wine per year, not just for his flagship K Vintners, but also his Charles Smith Wines, SIXTO, Wines of Substance, ViNO, Casa Smith and B.Leighton Wines.

Each fall during crush, grapes are carted into Seattle from the various Washington state vineyards Smith owns, with 455 tons of grapes processed this year alone.

Smith realized what is increasingly obvious to other vitners: Bring the wine to where the vast majority of people in this country actually live.

Across the country, other winemakers have done likewise.

Case in point, a couples miles from my apartment in Brooklyn, there's the [Red Hook Winery](#), which is set on an industrial pier close enough to see the Statue of Liberty.

It was started in July of 2008 by Mark Snyder, a Brooklyn native, who tapped Abe Schoener and Robert Foley, two friends from the wine mecca of Napa Valley, to oversee the on-site production of wines using grapes sourced from up to 15 different vineyards within the Empire State.

By choosing industrial Brooklyn, Red Hook Winery can stand out from the Long Island wine world and be closer to the New York City restaurants that actually serve their product.

Urban wineries aren't only emerging on the coasts. They are popping up in other regions of the country not typically associated with fine wine.

Like [Gruet Winery](#) in Albuquerque, which produces sparkling wines using grapes from high-altitude New Mexico vineyards. There's the [Infinite Monkey Theorem](#) in Denver, where offbeat wines come in cans or on tap—perfect for a city already obsessed with its craft beer.

There's even [Henke Winery](#) in Cincinnati, sourcing grapes from California, New York, and even a vineyard in nearby Ohio.

Back on the West Coast, a region known more for its viticulture, there are several urban wineries. Portland alone boasts [Division Winemaking Company](#) and [Urban Crush](#) among others.

In Berkeley, California, there's the popular [Donkey & Goat Winery](#). In bustling San Francisco, there's [Bluxome Street Winery](#).

“The advantage is simple—we love making wine right where people drink it,” Bluxome’s winemaker Webster Marquez tells me.

Marquez admits that general San Francisco busyness and the higher cost of doing business in an urban environment are minor drawbacks to the set-up, but they are well worth the benefits reaped by the city locale.

“Instead of having to brave a Saturday car ride, Napa Valley traffic, and boozy rental car drivers, we can offer the same wine right where people live and work, folded into the fabric of people’s lives,” he says.

Believe it or not, California winemaking actually did not start in Napa or Sonoma, but in San Francisco, right in the same South of Market neighborhood where Bluxome currently stands (though at that time it was called South of Slot, referring to the cable car line that divided the street).

Dozens of wineries and commercial cellars stood in this urban area until the 1906 earthquake. That destruction coupled with the Prohibition Era ended urban winemaking in San Francisco for nearly 100 years until Bluxome opened in 2011.

The rise—or, in some cases, the return—of the urban winery offers tremendous opportunities for wine producers and sellers.

“The best way to draw people into your store and get them to love your wines is to get them in front of them, and there will always be a greater opportunity to do so in an urban area where you can reach more people,” Katie Delaney Owen, the director of [Club W](#), an online wine recommendation service, tells me.

I witnessed the commercial and entertainment potential of the urban winery in full swing when I attended Jet City’s grand opening.

The floor space where grapes are crushed was cleared so thousands could spill in to drink wine poured straight from the barrels and devour enough caviar to make me worry if any sturgeon was left in the Caspian Sea.

Seattle Mayor Ed Murray and several Seattle Mariners attended. Jerry Lee Lewis—one of Smith’s idols—eventually took the stage set right in the middle of the barrel room to belt out “Great Balls of Fire.”

Within a few festive hours, I was drunk from enjoying more than my fill of delicious city-produced wine. Still, the very best part of the urban wine experience came at the end: I called for an Uber, and I was back in my hotel room within minutes.