

Charles Smith Unleashes Legacy Pinot Noir Project in Washington State

L.M. Archer

“And so the idea of what’s going to happen in American wine is what’s really exciting about this project in particular.”

—Charles Smith, Golden West Pinot Noir



ERIC BECKER

Charles Smith is on a quest to show that Pinot Noir can grow well in Washington state.

The trademark black t-shirt and shock of white curls comes into view first. “Can you see me?” Charles Smith, former band promoter turned House of Smith Wines winemaker is in the house. Or Zoom chatroom, anyway.

Wine for the People

“I didn’t really want to talk about it until I finally got the wine that I was setting out to make,” says Smith. He’s talking about Golden West Wines, his groundbreaking Washington state Pinot Noir project launched in 2018. “The first vintage or two, we made wine that got excellent reviews. I guess 93

points for a \$20 bottle of wine a couple of years in a row is not a bad thing. But I felt the wine that I really wanted, what I envisioned, we nailed it finally.”

Smith plans to produce 150,000 cases within 10 years; an artisanal project planted to commercial scale. Currently, the 2020 production totals 27,000 cases, with 68,000 cases slated for the 2021 vintage. Smith underscores the \$20 bottle price will remain, though he also admits to the potential for premium, small-batch Golden West offerings in the future. Just not now.

“I lived hand-to-mouth for most of my life,” he said. “I think everybody deserves more for their money. And if you’re going to actually receive somebody’s hard-earned income, I want to get up earlier than anybody else, stay up later than everybody else and, during the night, I want to dream about

what I'm going to do the next day. And that's how I approach my wine. The overall thing is, I'm making my wine for the people. I want to make something that is far beyond anybody's expectations."

The restless impresario knows a thing or two about exceeding expectations. Founder of K Vintners in 1999, he's crafted everything from award-winning Syrah to value-conscious blends. In 2010, Smith sold his House Brands and Magnificent Wine Company portfolio to Precept Wines. In 2016, he sold Charles Smith Wines to Constellation for a whopping \$120 million. His current House of Smith empire comprises K Vintners, Sixto, Wines of Substance, Vino Casa Smith, PopUp Sparkling, B. Leighton, and Golden West.

Despite his stratospheric success, Smith never lost sight of his by-the-bootstraps beginnings. "When I started my winery, the only employee for the winery for the first seven years was me," he says. "I was the accountant. I self-distributed my wine in Washington state. I drove it door-to-door in my '87 Chevy Astro van. And when I started House wine, and sold it, it was 90,000 cases. I was the only employee. When you start with \$5,000 borrowed, you don't have a lot of employees."

Early on, what Smith lacked in employees, he made up for in passion and most of his greatest commercial hits started out as personal passion projects.

"I mean, going back to something like Kung Fu Girl—who knew that there was going to be 300,000 cases of single vineyard Riesling for \$12 called Kung Fu Girl that everyone wants to drink?" he asked. "Not because they think it's funny, but because they found that while they didn't know they actually loved Riesling like the way I love Riesling, they found out, 'Wow, we love Riesling, too!' And the idea was based on that love, and that is reason why I did this."

Hibernating Bear

Not one for half-measures, Smith purchased 500 acres in the Royal Slope AVA specifically to plant Pinot Noir—an uncommon variety to be planted in the state. "Right now, we have 373 acres of Pinot Noir in the ground," he said of Golden West Vineyard. "As of this spring, there'll be 500 acres planted when we get done planting."

Smith already sourced Chardonnay nearby for his Sixto and Wines of Substance labels. "Where great Chardonnay lives, so does Pinot Noir," he says. "Why don't I do what I've done throughout my whole career, pick a single site, put all my chips in, and go for it?"

One of Washington state's newer appellations, Royal Slope AVA gained approval in 2022. Contained within Columbia Valley AVA's nearly 60,000 acres,



This aerial image shows the river and slope influences of the Golden West vineyard.

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it spans just 1,900 acres, planted mostly to Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chardonnay. The area shares some of Columbia Valley's arid and semi-arid continental climate characteristics, but with a twist: various elevations, some rising over 1,700 feet, keep Royal Slope cooler than nearby wine regions like Wahluke Slope AVA.

In a state where Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah predominate, statistics about Pinot Noir prove slim. According to the 2017 Washington Vineyard Acreage Report compiled by the USDA/National Agricultural Statistics Service, Pinot Noir plantings totaled 626 acres statewide. Additionally, the Washington State Wine Commission 2020 Wine Grape Production Report revealed that while the state produced 178,500 total tons of red wine, Pinot Noir accounted for only 1,650 tons.

Smith's vineyard changes the equation. With Bourgogne as his lodestar, Smith noted similarities between his vineyard and Pinot Noir's Old World birthplace. Both share a similar 47th parallel. Both share a continental climate. Moreover, unlike other areas of eastern Washington that endure 100+-degree heat during summertime, Golden West enjoys temperatures in the mid-80s, not unlike those of Bourgogne.

The reason for the lower temperatures stems from the site's proximity to the Columbia River, and its higher elevation. River-generated winds continually sweep upslope to the 1,600 foot-plus vineyards. These winds lower temperatures in summer and prevent frost in winter. During growing season, grapes benefit from slower ripening, resulting in lower sugars, lower alcohol, and higher acidity.

Soils prove vaguely similar. While Burgundian soils comprise mostly limestone and marl, Golden West features limestone, broken volcanic rock and sand. "We have a lot in common with places that make really highly perfumed, powerful, deep and dense wines," says Smith. "The things that you would look for if you're going to look for someplace in North America to produce Pinot Noir."

This compelling combination of components—climate, aspect, soils—convinced Smith to grow Pinot Noir in Washington state. "Great winemakers grow great grapes," says Smith. "When David Lett started in the 1960s, everyone thought he was crazy. 'Pinot Noir in Oregon? You're insane!' Well, now he considered one of the fathers of Oregon Pinot Noir. They didn't set out to do that. I didn't set out to do it. But it's Washington—why not?"

Aside from overlooked terroir, Smith contends Washington state lagged in Pinot Noir plantings for a few other reasons. Firstly, the state's early emphasis upon white varieties. "The thing is that people eventually planted red grapes," said Smith. "Why did everybody think red wine wouldn't be brilliant in Washington state?"

Secondly, the region's historic focus upon urban production centers in western and eastern Washington hampered Pinot growth. "Just because



you're in a center of population, and it's easier to market, doesn't mean that that's where the most brilliant wine will be produced," he added.

Instead, Smith considers Golden West a new way forward for Washington state wine, one based upon expansion and experimentation. "Washington is in its infancy of winemaking. We have so much dirt that has never been turned over," he said. "I think the industry should be very excited about new places to grow wine—not just where I happen to be in Washington. I think that's what makes this project so exciting, that it's right underneath everybody's noses. It's been here all along, since they planted Pinot Noir in Oregon in the 1960s. A hibernating bear is a really interesting thing when it is awakened, you know?"

Perfect Alchemy

Despite Smith's maverick mindset, the former rocker views himself as 'an Old World guy,' with a serious respect for Old World winemaking traditions. "That's how I feel inside," he stated. "I'm an Old World guy living in the New World. I've always been that."

To that end, Smith farms sustainably, eschewing synthetic chemicals in the vineyard. He picks early morning at first light, performing triage in the field. At the winery, he prefers whole cluster, adjusting according to vintage. He also insists upon 100 percent native fermentation, though maceration varies according to vintage. "I mean, there's no recipe. On average, 37 days is about right," he recalled. "And it goes to barrel dirty after pressing."

Once in barrel, the wine ages undisturbed on its gross lees for approximately 11 to 13 months prior to drawing off, assembling, and bottling. Smith employs 20 to 30 percent new oak on his Pinot Noirs, using only barrels of "the highest caliber possible," with light to medium toast. The rest age in neutral, 600-liter demi-muids and puncheons.

"My philosophy is use the appropriate barrel for the appropriate wine. I think there's a perfect alchemy," he said. "I prefer the neutrality, and I'm also concerned that we go to barrel dirty, and that we rest on the gross lees without being disturbed. You know, it's more of a textual aspect. I'm known for making very smooth wines. It should be inherently pleasant to drink, and really balanced."

The Promise

Smith inserts himself into every aspect of the Golden West project, including wine label design. "A label should say something about the wine," he noted. "I think it should communicate the language of wine to the people that are

going to drink it and tell you something about what you're gonna find in the bottle."

Smith collaborates with long-time friend and Danish clothing designer Rikke Korff for all his labels. "It was supposed to look like somebody made it with their hands," said Smith. "When we look at Old World producers and wines, we think about the artisan producer, and we think about their sense of balance in nature. And that's why the label looks as it looks, the colors in balance with nature. It's highly visible."

He proves equally involved in the label's wording. "Back in the day, they said 'Go West, young man' to find your fortune," Smith explains. "The West was always considered the Promised Land, where everything was possible. And the wine itself is called 'Golden West 'The Promise' Pinot Noir' because for me, it's to fulfill the promise between myself and the person who buys a bottle of my wine. I came out here to the Golden West to seek my fortune and fulfill my promise through the work that I do."

Legacy

Ultimately, Smith regards Golden West as his legacy project. "I believe it'll be my legacy. When does one ever have the chance to be the first?" he asks. "I wasn't trying to be the first in a meaningful way. I mean, there are other people making Pinot Noir in Washington state, in very small batches, and very much under the radar. I sell wine in 50 states, and in 28 countries. When I say, 'in a meaningful way,' I mean, where more people can have access to it, in a volume where there's wine to be had. So, in that way, I can be the first to ever try from Washington state. And to do it in a way that deserves to exist. I mean, I don't plant enough grapes over 10 years to produce 150,000 cases of single vineyard wine unless I mean it."

Clearly, he means it. A shrewd businessman with an artisan's soul, Golden West reflects Smith's quest for self-expression. "My wine has to have heart," he concluded. "Otherwise, it'd be heartbreaking for me. It really means something to me. It means everything. You know, I can't force people to love the wine, the wine must be something you can love." **WBM**

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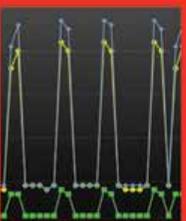
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