

# Two brothers discovered wine and never looked back

## How the Smiths left Southern California to create Smith-Madrone



As brothers are sometimes known to do, one of them comes up with a harebrained idea and his sibling becomes an accomplice in the escapade. Such was the case more than 40 years ago when Stu Smith bought a thickly forested ranch on Spring Mountain planning to transform it into a vineyard and winery. His older brother Charlie was teaching sixth grade at the time in San Leandro.

“That wasn’t really what he wanted to do,” Stu said, “So I said ‘Look, I’m in over my head here.’ So he came up.”

That was 1971. Charlie joined Stu full-time at the vineyard in 1973 and never looked back. In the following years the brothers worked hard together to carve out a hillside vineyard, build a small winery and launch Smith-Madrone, one of Napa Valley’s pioneering and most fiercely independent wine producers. And four decades later, Stu and Charlie Smith are still pretty much doing it all on their own.

Located high on Spring Mountain, the Smith-Madrone ranch covers 200 acres of hillside with just shy of 40 acres planted to vineyard. Like many of the small, remote vineyards in the area, the Smith’s property commands stunning views of the Napa Valley floor, Mount Saint Helena and the eastern hills of Napa County.

The mid-morning fog had just lifted from the fruit-laden vines when Stu Smith arrived at the small winery with his springer spaniel Curley. Stu’s son, Sam, was helping Charlie prepare for the upcoming crush.

“Stuart tends to handle the vineyard stuff and I handle the winery stuff,” Charlie said. “He goes out and schmoozes with the distributors, and I show people around the winery. He’s the office and I do the shipping department, which is surprisingly demanding.”

The demanding shipping duties are probably due to the strong following Smith-Madrone has developed over the years. The winery currently produces about 3,500 cases of estate-grown cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and riesling, a lineup that has changed little in the last four decades.

Although the rustic winery has no tasting room, plenty of wine lovers book visits to the remote vineyard. All are hosted by at least one of the Smith brothers, another do-it-yourself duty Stu and Charlie enjoy. Stu believes that Smith-Madrone’s simplicity, remoteness and high wine quality attract visitors wanting an alternative to the busier, more opulent valley floor.

“They, like us, and, I’m not sure what it means, but everybody says we’re authentic,” Stu said. “I’m not sure how you define authentic but we’re apparently it.”

The brothers certainly look authentic, each sporting a full beard and the rugged complexion earned from years of working outdoors. Perhaps more authentic, however, is what the Smiths do with both vine and wine in an industry that

now seems awash in technology, product manipulation and slick marketing.

Stu got the wine bug when he and Charlie were college students at UC Berkeley in the mid-1960s.

“I was drinking less beer and more wine,” he said. “You know, a hot date meant Lancers rosé or Mateus and Gallo Hearty Burgundy.”

During his senior year, Stu took a few night wine classes at UC Davis, and his brother would sometimes accompany him. Stu liked the classes and decided to return to Davis to earn a graduate degree in the school’s fledgling viticulture program.

“My only claim to fame (at UC Davis) is that I was the department’s first teaching assistant,” he said, noting that he worked with industry pioneers Maynard Amerine and Vernon Singleton, both early professors in the Davis program. “I didn’t graduate but I did two years of work out there and then this got in the way,” he said, gesturing toward the vineyard.

Excited about a career in viticulture, Stu found the Spring Mountain property in 1970. The 200-acre ranch had been part of a 550-acre property originally homesteaded in the 1880s by George Cook. Walking a portion of the property called Cooks Flat, Stu found evidence of a turn-of-the-century vineyard nestled in the dense forest. He later learned that Cook’s vineyard and most of the other vines on Spring Mountain were wiped out by phylloxera in the late 19th century.

“There were Douglas fir trees that were 2 1/2 feet in diameter ... that had at the base a little grape stake pooched out at about a 45-degree angle,” he said. “It lays waste to the claim that once you put (land) into vineyards it will never be back to what it was.”

The forest also included thickets of manzanita and, more than anything, madrone trees. There was so much madrone on the property that the brothers later included the tree in the winery’s name.

After acquiring the property in 1971, Stu got a permit and contracted to have the property commercially logged, removing about a half-million board feet of lumber. He also had the stumps removed. The brothers did the rest to make the land vineyard-ready.

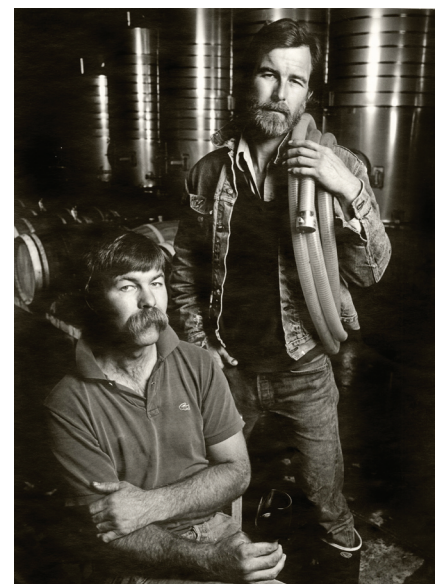
“When it comes to rocks and roots there are no other vintners in the valley who have picked up more rocks and roots and burned more piles than we have,” Stu said.

Charlie pointed to a neat, 50-yard berm of rocks piled six-foot-high east of the central vineyard. He said the rocks were removed from the original Cook vineyard in the 1880s, most likely by Chinese laborers.

“We’ve also added to the pile,” he said. “We still pick up a lot of rocks.”

So many rocks, Stu said, that the brothers changed plans for the construction of their winery building.

“We were going to build the winery out of stone,” he said, “but after years of picking



up rocks and smashed fingers and thumbs, we said forget that, we're never touching those suckers again."

Born and raised in beachside Santa Monica, the Smith brothers were admittedly out of their element among the lush forests and challenging terrain.

"We were basically sort of typical Southern Californians in a lot of ways," Charlie said. "I mean, Stuart was a lifeguard in Santa Monica. I was a camp counselor for the Boy Scouts on Catalina. Stuart used to race sailboats with a guy and surf. I became a really serious volleyball player for a long time ... you know the whole nine yards."

"But we moved north, and we ain't going back," Stu added.

The brothers also knew little about wine until they got to college, Stu said, noting that their parents' generation drank cocktails before dinner and "coffee with dinner to sober up from the cocktails."

Stu said that it was during his graduate work at UC Davis that he developed a sense of what wine should be. That ultimately shaped his vision for Smith-Madrone, he said.

"There are certain fundamentals that we embrace here that go back hundreds of years," Stu said. "One of those is the old 'Bacchus loves the hills' idea. Somebody said 'Why the mountains' and I said that if you're trying to make great wine you have to have great grapes. It's the ingredients ... and where do the ingredients grow best? That's the hills, in my opinion, and in the 40 years that we've been here my industry has come to recognize that. Now we have all of these little, very high-end, some of the most expensive wines coming out of the mountains ... and I like to think that we had something to do with it in pioneering wine quality that comes out of this area."

While he and Charlie developed the vineyard, Stu taught winemaking for several years at Napa College and later at Santa Rosa Junior College.

"It was mainly to help make ends meet," he said. "Charlie and I were just trying to make this thing work on a shoe string. You can't do today what we did back then. We were just from a middle-class family and there was more sweat equity available than there was money. We were young and strong and worked long hours."

They were also working together, a trait passed down from their father who spent his career working in the insurance business with one of his brothers.

As soon as they began clearing the land, the Smiths ran into a "kind of a buzzsaw of opposition," Stu said, including one neighbor who complained that they were destroying the secret source of his private wild mushroom stash. Another called Stu and accused him of clearing the remote property to make way for a new Holiday Inn.

"I said, 'Do you have any clue where I am?' There are certain things that haven't changed in the (Napa) valley and that includes people hate change," Stu said, adding that their project and another logging operation in the county prompted the Napa County Board of Supervisors to quickly pass a logging moratorium.

"Well, it turns out the county was illegal in what they did and I had the law on my side," Stu said, "but that was kind of the introduction to Napa County, which was the county passes a moratorium to try to stop what you're doing."

That early resistance by the county and others set the stage for Stu becoming actively involved in the early, sometimes tumultuous development of the modern-day Napa Valley wine industry. In the following years, he served on the Napa Valley Vintners board of directors, the Napa County Watershed Taskforce and the General Plan steering committee. He was also a founding member of the Farmers for Napa Valley, "a pushback group trying to stand up for the rights of farmers," he said.

The Smiths decided early on to produce wines only from estate-grown grapes, focusing on cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, riesling and, for a number of years, pinot noir. The later varietal is no longer a part of the Smith-Madrone portfolio.

"As I like to say, one of our best wines was a pinot noir and one of our worst wines was a pinot noir," Stu said.

The winery gained early recognition for its inaugural wine, a feat that Stu directly credits to his brother.

"Our first wine was the '77 riesling, and it won a huge award in Europe called the Wine Olympics, held in 1979," Stu said. "I think one of the reasons we make such good rieslings is that one of Charlie's great passions was German riesling. He understood riesling in a way that I don't think most people did at that time."

About half of the Smith's current production is cabernet sauvignon with the remainder split between chardonnay and riesling. In 2012, they released their first reserve wine, Cook's Flat Reserve, a small-lot cabernet produced from an eight-acre block of the mountain vineyard. The brothers are committed to producing the reserve wine only when the quality warrants it. Selling for \$200 a bottle, Cook's Flat Reserve represents a new price among the winery's more affordable wines.

"We think that we can successfully compete in this category," Stu said. "It's not a category that we can live in. We can't afford \$200 bottles of wine but we can make wine for people who can afford \$200 bottles of wine and give them a good option."

Regardless of price, Stu said that he and Charlie remain committed to producing wines that, above all, reflect uniqueness of time and place. In addition to crafting wines that display varietal character, balance and complexity, Stu said the "fourth hallmark of wine" has more to do with embracing individuality.

"The French call it 'terroir,'" he said. "A lot of people call it a sense of place. I call it more an ephemeral sense of art, which is that wine should be unique. If you buy a bottle of wine from Smith-Madrone it should be like a painting, like a piece of art. Charlie and I think that one of the overarching issues of what we're trying to do here is to get whatever the vintage is into the glass of wine. Vintage dating is a way of celebrating the diversity of the harvest, not the commonality. Not the sameness. It's slow food versus fast food."

If Smith-Madrone wines succeed in conveying that "sense of art" it is probably due in large part to the longevity and steadfast vision of Stu and Charlie who, after 40 years on the mountain, are anything but ephemeral. The brothers exude the sort of independence and tenacity typical of many other small vintners making wine in the hills around Napa Valley.

"I do think that there is a lot of individuality up in the hills," Charlie said.

"I also think it takes a strong personality to exist up here," Stu added. "You learn by doing it the hard way and hence you have strong but valid opinions."

"Strong opinions aren't always valid," Charlie countered.

"Mine are," Stu shot back, as brothers are sometimes known to do.

Contact the winery to purchase Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cook's Flat Reserve: [www.smithmadrone.com](http://www.smithmadrone.com) and [www.cooksflatreserve.com](http://www.cooksflatreserve.com).

