

## Smith-Madrone: Tasting a Napa Valley pioneer

Elin McCoy ventures to Napa Valley's Spring Mountain District to taste at Smith-Madrone, known for its age-worthy, balanced wines that also tend to be released at relatively reasonable prices...

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Smith-Madrone vineyards in Spring Mountain, Napa Valley. Credit: Matthew Denny / Smith-Madrone

Smith-Madrone is one of Napa Valley's pioneer estates. It was founded in 1971 by Stuart Smith, known as Stu, who is here for this tasting and is sporting a greying beard and impressive brush moustache as the morning light streams into the ivy-covered barn winery high on Spring Mountain.

A long table with a white cloth, dozens of glasses, and red napkins is surrounded by French barrels stacked four high. The oldest wine on the table, a Cabernet, was made here 40 years ago.

Stu's brother, Charles (Charlie), is opening bottles of Riesling, Chardonnay, and Cabernet. His beard and moustache are white. The two engage in back-and-forth banter that resembles a good stage routine. It feels like a Napa scene from several decades ago.

In many ways, Smith-Madrone is a throwback to an era before wineries resembled Tuscan villas, before cult Cabernets cost \$500-plus a bottle, and before Ferraris lined streets in St. Helena far below.

The Smiths are proudly old school in their winemaking philosophy, the age-worthy, balanced wines they make, the reasonable prices they charge, and the homely way they welcome visitors. The winery is the tasting room. The guides are the Smith brothers, or Stu's son Sam, who is now assistant winemaker.

What makes Smith-Madrone so compelling is its authenticity in a glitzy place devoted to image maintenance.

After nearly 50 years, this is still a small estate winery whose reds and whites reflect the beliefs of two men who don't tone down their opinions, whether controversial or not.

Though respected, the Chardonnay, Riesling, and two Cabernets rarely make trophy lists and have never grabbed as much attention as they should. That's why I headed to the winery to taste their history and find out what's happening now.

## A mountain heritage

From downtown St. Helena, it takes 20 minutes to navigate the six miles of steep road and hairpin curves to the winery, 1,900 feet above the valley floor – and that's if someone who knows the way is driving. Being a mountain winery is central to Smith-Madrone's identity and the wines' personalities.

Scouting a place for a vineyard, Stu first walked this land in 1970. 'I believed then very strongly, as did Virgil in 43 BC, that wine loves the hills,' he says, ready with a historical overview.

## Smith-Madrone at a glance

**Founder:** Stuart Smith

**Founded:** 1971

**Location:** Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley

**Annual production:** 3,000 to 4,000 cases

**Vineyards:** 38 acres, dry-farmed, first planted 1972

**Elevation** 1,300 to 2,000 feet

**Soil:** Volcanic-based Aiken Stony Clay loam

**Grapes planted:** Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Riesling

**Wines produced:** Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cook's Flat Reserve, Rosé

Old redwood stakes revealed vineyards were here in the 1880s, part of a land grant to George Cook, but phylloxera destroyed the vines and they were abandoned. Picholine olive trees, 120 years old, frame a Valley floor view.

We head out to the best vantage point to look at the winery's 15.3 hectares of vineyards, some of which have 34-degree slopes. The soil is Aiken Stoney Clay loam, volcanic based, deep rust-red, and studded with rocks.

While at UC Davis, Stu joined with family and friends to buy 81 hectares (200 acres) that stretch from 1,300 to 2,000 feet (610 metres) in elevation.

His brother helped him log one million board feet of timber (2,360 cubic metres), pulling out massive roots by hand. They named the property after its predominant tree, the red-trunked Madrone. At the time the Valley had fewer than 30 wineries.

'That was the era of the Joe Heitz model of starting a winery,' Stu explains. 'You studied oenology and worked at everything as opposed to making money in some other industry and then buying your way in.'

In 1972, the Smiths planted two hectares (five acres) each of Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Riesling, all on their own roots.

Their first Riesling, 1977, put them on the world wine map when it was named the 'Best Riesling in the World' in 1979 at an international competition sponsored by Gault-Millau.

## Timeline

**1971** Stuart Smith founds the winery on Spring Mountain

**1972** The vineyard is planted to Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir

**1973** Charles Smith, Stu's brother, joins the winery full time

**1977** The first wine, a Riesling, is produced

**1979** The 1977 Riesling wins "Best Riesling" award at Gault-Millau Wine Olympics

**1986** The Smiths graft Pinot Noir vines over to Chardonnay

**1998** The brothers begin replanting the vineyard on phylloxera resistant rootstock

**2000** For the first time, the estate Cabernet includes Merlot and Cabernet Franc

**2007** The first vintage of Cook's Flat Reserve, a high-end Cabernet blend

**2013** Sam Smith, Stu's son, joins winery full-time

**2018** The winery produces the first rosé

They finally abandoned Pinot Noir, grafting over the vines to Chardonnay in 1986, added a reserve Cabernet Sauvignon named Cook's Flat in 2007 and a rosé in 2018.

## Terroir and the Smith-Madrone philosophy

Spring Mountain District, an AVA since 1993, is an area of the Mayacamas mountain range named for the hundreds of underground springs and is the coolest and wettest Napa's sub-region.

More than half the plantings are Cabernet, but I've never found the wines share a particular flavour profile.

Instead, the AVA is touted for its 'mountain men.'

Fritz Maytag, owner of York Creek Vineyards, once told me the District's winemakers are freer, tougher, more independent and contrarian, all of which describes the Smith brothers.

Though Riesling plantings in the Valley have dwindled to one-twentieth of what they were in 1979, for example, the Smiths are committed to it, and their version remains Napa's finest, with classic varietal character.

At the heart of their philosophy – and their success– are mountain terroir and dry farming. 'Think of tomatoes,' Stu says. 'If you water them every day, they have no flavor. The same is true of grapes. Avoiding irrigation makes more concentrated wines.'

Given California's recurring droughts, that's a challenge. Since 2017, the Smiths water vines if needed at the beginning of veraison.

While they are all-in on sustainable farming, don't ask Stu about biodynamics unless you want a lecture on why science is so important to viticulture and winemaking. For a time, he authored a website titled 'Biodynamics is a Hoax.'

## Tweaking the Old School Style

'What distinguishes Spring Mountain wines is structure,' says Charlie, and Smith-Madrone's Cabernets have it.

The duo championed unfiltered, unfinned wines long before Robert Parker Jr made the idea popular.

Their firm, balanced, complex reds show off cedary, herbal aromas and spicy-savoury dark fruit flavors and age for decades. The barrel-fermented Chardonnays are the opposite of the oaky, buttery style, with distinctive floral aromas, succulence and racy acidity.

But in 1997, they began re-evaluating everything they'd been doing.

Phylloxera forced them to replant on resistant rootstock, starting in 1998, and the Smiths took it as a do-over opportunity. They changed row orientation from east-west to northeast-southwest so the vines got substantial morning sun, but were shaded in late afternoon. They also changed spacing and trellising.

The early Chardonnays had been pretty austere, so they embraced malolactic fermentation and new oak, and about six years ago added batonnage. They seem to have hit a lemon-scented, mineral sweet spot.

In the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, the estate red was 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, but they planted Merlot and Cabernet Franc and added these to the blend in 2000, giving the wine more complexity.

They wish now they'd planted more of the latter. Until the 1980s they aged the estate red in French oak, then turned to American because it cost less.

'But the difference between American and French oak is like the difference between *Baywatch* and Sophia Lauren,' says Charles, and since the mid-2000s they're back to French, and have reduced the percentage of new barrels. The result is more elegance and brightness than ever.

With the 2007 vintage, they introduced a much more expensive Cabernet reserve wine that shows off more power and intensity.

'We kept tasting expensive Napa Cabs that were just yuck. Cook's Flat is our attempt to compete with the first growths,' says Stu. The 2016 is their best yet.

## What's next?

Sam Smith, Stu's son, who sports a dark beard and moustache, now works full-time at the winery, but the long-term picture isn't yet clear.

Making great wine, they say, is no longer enough. ‘So much money is coming in that it makes me wonder how we can compete against millionaires who can lose money year after year,’ says Stu.

‘We’re not sports stars or celebrities. We don’t do Corinthian columns.’ They worry that regulations and the costs of permits will drive small producers out of the business.

For sure, they’ll continue to fight for the right to plant on Napa’s hillsides, a controversial view to local environmentalists. ‘All things being equal, the best grapes come from the mountains,’ insists Stu.

The Smiths know what matters to them, and the wines reflect their commitment to make wines they like. After all, they always have.



Left to Right: Sam Smith, Stu Smith, and Charles Smith