

Smith-Madrone in Stuart Pigott's Global Riesling Blog

We were honored to have had Riesling connoisseur **Stuart Pigott** visit in early July. Here is his blog post, which he has kindly given us permission to reprint.



California Riesling Diary: Day 4 – The Smith-Madrone Magic

Stuart Pigott, Riesling Global blog <http://www.stuartpigott.de>

Why do I do this job? Why am I more excited about it than ever before? Because of people like Stuart (left) and Charles Smith (right) of Smith [Madrone](#) estate on Spring Mountain in Napa Valley. Before I visited them yesterday I knew that they're two of the unsung heroes of American Riesling, but since my visit I would say they're also unsung heroes of American Chardonnay and American Cabernet Sauvignon. These are actually all world class wines, however I think it's important to emphasize that

although the Smith brothers are inspired by certain Western European wines, those which they produce are American thru and thru. What their wines never do, however, is neatly fit into any of the currently Fashion Wine stereotypes, American or global, because they all have genuine style by the bucket load. Of course, that means that certain critics, somms, collectors and wine fans don't take them seriously, and maybe never will. The most refreshing thing of all about the Smith brothers is that – as I think you can clearly see from my picture – this situation doesn't get Stuart and Charles



down in the least, quite the opposite. Their quiet confidence derives from the conviction that they're doing the right thing (also that they've considered all the other options and rejected them with good reason), and from the fact that there are more than enough wine drinkers out there who appreciate the Smith-Madrone wines for them to sell out at healthy prices.



At least part of the secret of this is their location on Spring Mountain where they've planted 35 acres of vineyards (9 acres of which are Riesling), an area of mixed forest (pictured left is a stand of redwoods) and some grassy hillsides, part of which they use as a shooting range. From up here they look down upon the floor of the Napa Valley where wine can be produced more cheaply and sold more easily the waves of well-to-do

tourists who pass through at this time of year. Up on their section of Spring Mountain there are almost zero tourists and wine is far more arduous and expensive to produce. This has encouraged the development of a very different spirit and I think you can read that in their

faces. When Stuart Smith said to me, "California goes over the top. That's what Hollywood is all about," he was defining the Smith Madrone position as one of opposition to that. That's not a willful form of opposition though, but a very considered one. The Smith brothers have a position and that, no less than their special location, is what makes these wines so very different from the Napa and Californian norms.

Of course, the mere fact of growing Riesling in Napa Valley (the vineyard is pictured below) seems like a revolutionary act to some people in the California wine industry, but the wines I tasted ranging from 2013 back to 1994 were not only of consistently high quality, they were also utterly distinctive. "I think the reason we've done so well with Riesling is that the concept of balance is fundamental to what we do. We're in a different and warmer region than Riesling's homeland in Germany, so we've been able to make the wines with less sweetness," Stuart Smith explained. In fact, recent vintages have been properly dry and wonderfully expressive (see the hit list of the best 20 dry wines on Planet Riesling in my book BEST WHITE WINE ON EARTH). The aromas range from white peach and lemon to dried flowers and herbs, the acidity is bright and enormously refreshing without a hint of sharpness. With age a note that reminds me of quince jelly develops. If you want a "dry" white that tastes lush and creamy, sweet and heavy like the Rombauer Chardonnay, then run for cover! This is not the wine for you! However, if you want to feel fully alive and you aren't afraid of acidity, then you could find this wine seriously exciting.



It was interesting to taste how when the wines are young the Chardonnay and the Riesling from Smith Madrone share some aromas, and the Rieslings and Cabernet Sauvignons share something vital in a less direct way; dry elegance and brightness. That says to me how strongly the personality of this site asserts itself. More words are not necessary to convey the essentials of these wines, except perhaps to mention that the Smith Brothers 1996 Riesling was one of the best mature American Rieslings I ever tasted. Which other American Rieslings can match its vitality and uniqueness of flavor? The current vintage costs just \$27, making it one of the great dry white wine bargains.

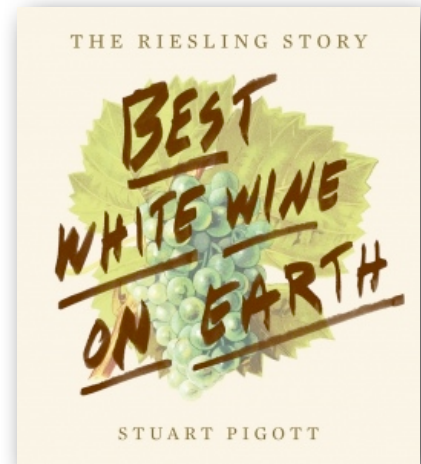
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Smith-Madrone in *Best White Wine on Earth* by Stuart Pigott

Smith-Madrone is one of the wineries featured in English journalist Stuart Pigott's new book, *The Riesling Story: Best White Wine On Earth* (208 pages, published by Stewart, Tabori and Chang on June 17, 2014).

Smith-Madrone is the only dry Riesling from North America in Mr. Pigott's list of Top 20 Dry Rieslings in the book. Some excerpts:

Some of my favorite Californian Rieslings, like that from Smith-Madrone on Spring Mountain way above Napa Valley, come from dramatic mountainous locations. Stuart Smith, who manages the vineyards, and his brother Charles, who does the winemaking, are mavericks who've consistently ignored the comings and goings of numerous wine fashions since founding their estate winery 40 years ago. They planted their Riesling on east-facing slopes so the vines would catch the gently warming morning sun and avoid the harsher afternoon sun. They make a properly dry Riesling that has arguably been the most consistent wine from this grape in the entire state since the first vintage back in 1977. This bold and vibrant wine has a stunny apple freshness, but also aromas of dried flowers, melon, peach and lime. It ages as well as any high-end European dry Riesling too, as the 1996 vintage magnificently demonstrates, now smelling toasty and honeyed, and tasting at once rich, mellow and lively.



**"Riesling is
the white
wine of our
time."**

Mr. Pigott's book is a one-of-a-kind guide to Riesling, full of personal stories from the world of top winemakers, sommeliers, and restaurateurs who are as devoted to Riesling as he is. Pigott writes "There's not only a spirit of the times; there's also a wine of the times, and Riesling is the white wine of our time. In a wine world dominated by smoke and mirrors, where standardization of flavor is the norm, Riesling remains strikingly and deliciously original."

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