

10 Questions for Stuart Smith of Smith-Madrone Winery

By Jennifer Huffman, Napa Valley Register, February 24, 2010



Stuart Smith is the general partner and founder of Smith-Madrone Vineyards and Winery on Spring Mountain in St. Helena.

Stuart Smith was at UC Berkeley in the mid-60s during a revolution — but not the revolution most people might think of.

“This was pre-Napa, pre-wine, pre-Cuisinart, pre-interest in food,” he said. “Roast beef wasn’t cooked unless it was gray, vegetables weren’t cooked unless they were limp and exotic cheeses were Monterey Jack or a sharp cheddar,” he said.

“All of that started to change with the Bay Area culture. And while I didn’t cook very well, I was learning to love wine,” he said.

After taking an introductory viticulture and enology class at UC Davis. Smith applied for graduate school at UC Davis and his career in the wine business was born.

In 1971, Smith started Smith-Madrone Winery, on Spring Mountain Road in St. Helena.

Which three people would you most like to have dinner with? / Aristotle after a day of teaching Alexander the Great. Thomas Jefferson after the ratification of the Bill of Rights. Papa Hemingway while on safari in Africa.

What job would you like to try/not like to try? / I would hate to work for the Sierra Club. I would love to be the engineer of the Pacific Daylight 4449 passenger train and drive that sleek and powerful steam locomotive down the California coast during the early 1950s.

What’s something people might be surprised to know about you? / At age 16, I purchased a 1929 Model A Special Coupe for \$200 and completely restored it. At one time, I knew more about the Model A than any other subject in the world. I refurbished every bolt, nut and fender and painted (it) with many coats of lacquer. My next restoration project is my 500 cc 1969 Triumph motorcycle. Slowly.

If you could change one thing about your business, what would it be? / Let me make an analogy with the “Wizard of Oz” to the wine business. Like the Scarecrow, the wine industry is mindlessly making wines to achieve some vaunted number, thus the resulting wines, like the Tin Man, have no heart. I can only hope that the Cowardly Lion will find his courage and roar his defiance and independence by making wines of balance, complexity and nuance. The witch would be (wine critic) Robert Parker because he’s the cause of all this stuff.

What's one thing Napa could do to help local business? / Get government out of our way. Over the past 40 years, government (all forms) went from working for the people to where it now seems that the people work for the government. We elect politicians to run government for our benefit, but instead, it seems they run government for their benefit.

What's the most significant project you've been involved with in your career? / Outside of creating Smith-Madrone Winery, I'd say being the 1986 Napa Valley Wine Auction chairman. I was the sixth chairman, and it was back in the day when the chairs did much of the work. Smith-Madrone is clearly the smallest winery to ever provide a chair for the auction.

What's your advice to someone who wants to get into the wine industry? / The first response is flippant — don't do it. Second is that there is always room for creativity. And even though the industry is much different today than it was 40 years ago, there is always opportunity for creative new ideas, new concepts and new venues. Even in bad times like this, there are still opportunities. If you really want to do it, you can do it, but you have to be creative and think outside the box.

How are you facing the challenges of our economy today? / We're responding like everyone else. We're trying to deal with direct-to-consumer(sales) as best as possible, maintain and not lose too much of our traditional distribution. We're branching out into social media. There is still a market for quality high-end wines, but it is a much tougher market.

What would you like see for the wine industry for five years from now? / Frankly, better wines. I think there's an awful lot of bad wine out there. I think that there's a lot of improvisation by people who are really not qualified to understand what they are doing.

What other business person(s) would you like to see featured in "10 Questions?" / Carl Doumani, Quixote Winery. Jay Corley, Monticello Vineyards. Mike Chelini, winemaker, Stony Hill Vineyard.

What was your first job? / Just after high school graduation, I qualified to be a lifeguard on the beaches of Santa Monica. I made the princely sum of \$2.96 an hour, which was over double what most of my friends could get for summer jobs. I guarded for five summers and never once saw Pamela Anderson.

What's the worst job you ever had? / Never had one. I love working.

What is the biggest challenge your business has faced? / Paperwork — I hate it.

I can't live without: red wine, French bread, unsalted butter and stinky cheeses.

What's on your to-do list? / Find the time to go elk hunting and fish for brook trout on the Sutton River, which is at the northern edge of Ontario, Canada.

Who do you most admire in the business world? / Anyone with the gumption and courage to open their own business. Whether they are a Bill Gates that creates Microsoft or the cartoon character Lucy with her lemonade stand, they all have my admiration.

What is one thing you hope to accomplish in your lifetime that you haven't yet? / Find peace.

What's your favorite gift to give? / The daily New York Times to my wife.

What is your favorite charity? / Boy Scouts.

What was your childhood ambition?/ To attend the Webb Institute of Naval Architecture and become a naval architect.

If you could be anywhere right now, where would you be? / Canoeing in the North Woods or hiking in the Sierra Nevada with either my buddies or the Boy Scouts.