

# Smith-Madrone 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon

## **San Francisco Chronicle's Top 100 Wines: The Best of the West**

by Jon Bonne, November 28, 2007

2003 Smith-Madrone Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon: The Smith brothers continue to find that fine line between the older, restrained style of Napa Cab and big, lusty doses of fruit that now seem de rigueur. What defines their current release are stand-up Spring Mountain tannins that give structure to a rich palate of black fruit, with scents of tobacco and licorice. It's a wine that will take time to evolve, but that's a sign of a Cab worth holding on to.

Cabernet Sauvignon also had a good outing, with 14 wines on the list. For all the talk of California Cabernet becoming a beast fueled by blackberry jam and overt alcohol, we found several ageless examples of how the state still makes some of the world's finest Cabernets. If there's a complaint, it's that price tags are generally stratospheric. But even there, Napa Valley's Spring Mountain District was a hero; Smith-Madrone offered world-class Cabernet for \$40.

## **New York Times**

“The Pour” blog): Eric Asimov, August 8, 2007

“I was really impressed with the cabernet sauvignon, which is made in a way that emphasizes taut structure and liveliness over soft amorphous fruit. The 1999 was superb – dense and slightly tannic with violet and mineral aromas and long lingering flavors. These are cabernets that will age well, though they're delicious now, too. I also especially like the '01 and '03. The cabernets are unfinned and unfiltered, and are aged in all new American oak barrels.... All told, the cabernets were balanced, and though the Smith-Madrone operation shouts “Rustic!” as surely as the Smiths could use shaves, the wines are elegant in a way that you rarely see in Napa cabernets anymore.”

## **Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences: The Weekly Wine Commentary**

Volume XII, Issue 45 January 17, 2008

Exceptional: Lean, classic Napa Valley herb/dust and cherry aroma, with a structure I haven't seen in years: Great to age! Or try now with aeration and a steak. A superb look back to an era when many Cabs showed structure. Not for those who want plushness.

## **San Francisco Chronicle**

by Jon Bonné, September 7, 2007:

2003 Smith-Madrone Spring Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon: Good luck finding folks whose Cabernet has less alcohol than their Chardonnay, but the Smith brothers can do it, crafting traditional wines from their mountaintop perch above St. Helena. At just 13.8% percent alcohol, this bottling from an uneven year hinges on a basketful of dried herbs and tobacco notes, as mountain wine as it gets. It melds a luscious black fruit nose, lifted minerality from the dense volcanic soils, with licorice and blackberry. Sweet fruit comes to the fore, but standup steep-slope tannins are right there behind, proof that time will do well by this bottle. The richness never goes away, thought, and the great balance portends an impressive life for this wine...

# Smith-Madrone 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon

## Restaurant News

by Ronn Wiegand – Category: Cabernet Expensive

2003 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon: “Very good quality! Complex in character, full bodied, lightly oaky, and long and tannic on the finish. It tastes of spicy oak, cedar, tobacco, aniseed, and black currant. [2009-2011] \*\*\*+”

## Chow.com blog

by Daniel Duane

Smith-Madrone Cabernet with Steak

Terroir is the foundation of a house; vintage is the house itself.

Stu Smith was 22 years old in 1970, the year he walked through a Douglas-fir forest that had been a vineyard back in the 1880s. Abandoned during Prohibition, the land was densely wooded, but Smith could see redwood grape stakes shoved over sideways by the two-foot trunks of trees. “I imagine a bird sat on the stake, pooped out the seed, and up popped a tree,” Stu told me, on the telephone. He said he had loggers cut out all the trees, and then he and his brother dug out the rocks and roots from the soil and burned back the stumps. This was all at a time when the American wine industry was a provincial one: “I don’t think there were 35 wineries,” Stu says. “It was much slower.” Anyway, one thing led to another and Smith-Madrone has become a venerable name in California Cabernet, and Stu’s opinions have taken on the tone I hear from a lot of the good winemakers these days: “We frankly have been making wines to our taste ever since. We don’t really make wines for judges, and we don’t make wines for wine critics. We make wines we think are relatively classically structured and have elegance and balance and complexity. We think it’s our job to get the vintage into the glass of wine, to provide something unique. I like to say that terroir is like the foundation of a house—it’s the same every year—but vintage is the house you actually build on that structure, and in some years there’s very little change, but in others it’s as different as a Frank Gehry or a Queen Anne Victorian.” Why do I care? Because I had a sample of his 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon recently, and I drank it alone—wife and girls out that night—with a pan-fried sirloin and a good magazine and a view of some glittering city lights in the darkness. And the wine brought me immense satisfaction: Every sip was a little journey, enriching and interesting and yet well balanced and not at all challenging. I thought it was fabulous. Here’s Stu’s take on the 2003: “Well, it’s unfinned and unfiltered, it’s still evolving, it’s got a little Cab Franc, a little Merlot. ... It’s a big wine, an interesting complex wine, not excessively tannic. Some people think it’s excessively soft, but it gets people talking about the wine. It’s also a wine that gives people a lot of pleasure. It’s what I think a wine really should be: It makes a statement, it has character, and yet it’s not over the top. My brother liked it better than I did in the beginning; it’s a wine that’s really evolved in the last couple of years being in the bottle. It’s got a good future ahead of it; I think they’ll last 15 years or more.”

My Tasting Notes: I’ve given them above, more or less. It’s a deep and lovely wine, rich and interesting and balanced, and transporting if you’re in the right mood. Everything I want out of a Cabernet.

# Smith-Madrone 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon

## Vinography blog

Wine and food adventures in San Francisco and around the world

by Alder Yarrow, January 2009

This Cabernet is made from the estate's 32-year-old, dry-farmed vines at the top of Spring Mountain. It ages for 22 months in new American Oak barrels (an unusual choice for both Napa and for Cabernet), and is bottled unfinned and unfiltered. After bottling the winery likes to hang onto it for a while, which means this 2003 is the current release (the 2004 will hit the market in a couple of months).

Tasting Notes: Dark ruby in color, this wine has a beautiful nose of plum, chocolate, and heady cedar aromas. In the mouth it is soft and silky on the tongue, with a surprisingly lightness for Napa Cabernet -- a bruiser this is most certainly not. The core flavors are black cherry and chocolate, and they dance, juicy on the tongue thanks to great acidity and faint, powdery tannins that simply play a background note to the overall bright quality of the wine. Incredibly easy to drink (a whole bottle).

There are more legends, stories, fairytales, and fables than anyone could count which all involve some guy up on a mountainside somewhere. Sometimes a hermit, sometimes a wizard, sometimes a troll -- sometimes just an old man who went to sleep under a tree for a long, long time. No matter what the story, there's always something a little different about the guy on the mountain, something that is both scary and alluring at the same time.

Stu Smith might be living out yet another version of one of these tales. The fact that Stu sports a big gray and white beard under a wizened and kindly face helps to reinforce the possibility that he might belong in some ancient tale. His start as a winemaker certainly sounds like it belongs in a storybook somewhere: a lone hiker in the early Seventies, stomping through the forests on the mountainside above St. Helena discovers the remains of ancient vineyards and is struck then and there by inspiration. In deciding to purchase that long forgotten parcel of land, and turn it again into a vineyard, Smith began a thirty-five year odyssey as a pioneer, an iconoclast, and what looks to be a permanent fixture on Napa's Spring Mountain. The venture, begun in 1973 with money from family and friends, is now one of the most established, and perhaps most under-appreciated wineries in the Spring Mountain District.

If you were going to start a Napa winery, even back in the Seventies, what would be the first kind of grape you'd plant? Certainly not Riesling. Yet that was the very first grape that Smith planted. Smith-Madrone Winery has produced one ever since, and even more surprisingly, especially to those unfamiliar with the winery, it's quite good. To those who have known about Smith Madrone for some time, this small production Riesling is one of Napa's best kept secrets.

Of course, you can't have a winery on Spring Mountain and not make Cabernet. That would be like having a winery in Montalcino and not making Brunello. Over the years, the winery has grown to a modest thirty or so acres, and after as many years in production, only makes around 4000 cases of wine, split between Cabernet, Chardonnay, and Riesling. Smith, along with his brother, and now his son, like to keep things manageable for a small family who choose to do a surprising number of things by hand.

The winery facility was built using stones and lumber from the property. As the winery was gradually built over the years, Smith and his brother discovered the remains of rock walls, caves, and old carriage roads created by the farmers who last ran the vineyards on the site, sometime before the

# Smith-Madrone 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon

turn of the century. Some evidence of the former tenants was not so hard to notice -- the property boasts a carefully planted line of 22 olive trees, most of which are over 100 years old.

Perhaps it was inspiration from the 19th century vintners whose traces could still be seen on the land, or perhaps it is the only way Smith could ever have operated, but the winery operates very much on the model of small European cellars. From the small volume of low yield fruit that is hand harvested each year, to barrel fermentation in small lots, Smith Madrone wines are hand-crafted from start to finish.

## **San Diego Union-Tribune**

by Robert Whitley

February 13, 2008

Smith-Madrone 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon, Spring Mountain District (\$40): This wine has been historically underrated, lost in the attention heaped on more expensive and trendy Napa Valley cabs. Could be because it's truly a mountain cab, crafted from vineyards on the cooler side of the Valley and thus slightly more austere in its youth than the flashier, jammier wines from the eastern hills above the valley floor. This vintage shows excellent depth and structure, complex dark-fruited aromas with a touch of earthiness, and fine tannins. I suspect it will improve over the next seven to 10 years.

Rating: 91 [http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20080213/news\\_1f13whitley.html](http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20080213/news_1f13whitley.html)

## **Frederick Koeppel's blog BiggerThanYourHead**

January 4, 2008

### **Smith-Madrone: Wines That Purists Could Love**

Sometimes it feels as if I have been condemned to a Circle of Hell, a mild circle certainly, compared to the more ingenious and punitive arrangements further down, but still one in which I am enjoined eternally to taste millions of Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay wines that all seem alike. The cabernets feature heaps of toasty new oak, super-ripe fruit, cushiony textures and alcohol levels of 14.5 to 15.2 percent; the chardonnays feature heaps of toasty new oak, super-ripe fruit, cushiony textures and alcohol levels of 14.5 to 15.2 percent. Such wines are professionally-made, well-intentioned and boring. Wait, this is no mythical Circle of Hell; this is my life!

Then there are the cabernets and chardonnays of Smith-Madrone Vineyards and Winery, perched atop Spring Mountain west of the town of St. Helena in the Napa Valley. Now when I say that Smith-Madrone makes wines that purists could love, I don't mean snobs or elitists or geeks or nerds; by "purists" I mean consumers who favor wines that focus on fruit and structure, that allow us to taste and feel where the wine came from and where it's going, what it's made of and how it sustains itself. That is the kind of wine that Smith-Madrone makes.

The winery was founded by brothers Stuart and Charles Smith, who purchased 200 acres on Spring Mountain in 1971. The wines are made from the same vines planted 32 years ago, for the cabernet, and 34 years ago, for the chardonnay. The steep vineyards with their volcanic soil, lying at elevations from 1,600 to 1,800, are dry-farmed, that is, they are never irrigated, relying only on what rain falls according to nature.

The Cabernet 2003 is a blend of 82 percent cabernet sauvignon, 10 percent merlot and 8 percent cabernet franc. This is a great, old-fashioned mountain-side cabernet, deep, rich and spicy, a construct of sinew and muscle and bone. Bright cassis and black cherry flavors are permeated by

## Smith-Madrone 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon

dusty, leathery tannins, briery, brambly elements and profound earthy and mineral qualities. The wine aged 22 months in American oak barrels, yet it didn't come out of that process with any bitterness or austerity — American oak has to be used carefully — but absorbed that wood for a firm, supportive structure to which keen acid lends vibrancy. Despite its size and seriousness, however, the wine is a sensualist's delight for its delicious black fruit (with a hint of cedar and wild berry), for its lacy etching of lavender and bittersweet chocolate, for its impeccable balance between elegance and power. You could drink a bottle tonight with a medium rare strip steak, hot and crusty from the grill, or let it age through 2013 to '15. The alcohol level, by the way, is only 13.8 percent. Production was 2,302 cases. I rate the wine Excellent.