

ST. HELENA STAR

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Fifty years ago, on May 14, 1971 I closed escrow on densely forested land at the top of Spring Mountain that had remnants of a long-abandoned vineyard. This would become Smith-Madrone Vineyards and Winery

Growing up lifeguarding on the beaches in Santa Monica, I never could have predicted that my life would take this turn. While majoring in Econ at Cal and visiting friends in the Napa Valley I began to consider whether my love of wine could become my life's work. Scouting had given me a love of the outdoors and the mountains and as a senior at Cal I became an intercampus exchange student, enrolling in the introductory Viticulture and Enology class at UC Davis. I was hooked and then enrolled in their V&E master's program.

I took to heart what Virgil wrote in 43 BC, that "Bacchus loves the hills." I believed then, as I still believe today, that there are two unassailable precepts about grapes and wine: the first is that only great wine can be made from great grapes and the second that, all things considered, the best grapes are grown on a mountain. Mountain grapes must struggle to grow by sending their roots deep into the soil searching for scarce water and nutrients. The result is that the vine produces a smaller berry, with a greater skin to juice ratio, and thus a more intensely flavored berry and a more interesting wine.

It was in the fall of 1970 that I first walked that densely forested property that would become Smith-Madrone. All that remained of the original vineyards planted in the 1880s were small redwood grape stakes interspersed in a forest of 100-foot tall Douglas fir trees.

The parcel sang to me --- I envisioned how its steep slopes, with well-drained volcanic Aiken stony clay loam soil, would be ideal for growing world-class grapes. I cobbled together a partnership and so it began.

The work that followed was huge, but I was seeing a dream come true. Charlie, my brother, joined me several years later. We got our Use Permit in 1973 and built the winery starting in 1974. My son Sam joined us in 2010.

In the last fifty years I've taken farming very seriously, from planting our first vines on their own roots, to dry farming, to anticipating and preventing soil erosion, and no less important, being a good custodian of the forests which surround our vineyards. In spring of 1972, we planted the first certified heat-treated own-rooted mother vines in the Napa Valley and we became Increase Block 91 for the Foundation Plant Material Service. We also made our own bench-grafted vines as we planted more vineyards. Starting in the early 1980s we started farming with "no tillage" using a permanent cover crop.

Another insight that's hit me recently as I contemplate the 50th anniversary of our winery is that the words "authentic" and "artisanal" applied to what we did before people used those terms as marketing buzz words. We want to make wines that are more than just hedonistic. I think of our wine as an ephemeral sense of art, that each wine is unique and should express the site, soil, climate and personality of us as both growers and winemakers. This is why we're an "Estate Grown" winery: we only use the grapes we grow on our own property.

Recognition came our way with our very first release, when our 1977 Riesling won "Best Riesling" in the "Wine Olympics," the first international competition organized by Gault Millau in Europe. Periodically we review everything from soup to nuts, from row direction of the vines to how often to stir the lees in Chardonnay to how we define maturity. We march to our own drummer: we waited 36 years to release a reserve wine.

In these years I've seen how over-regulation is crippling our industry and at the same time, how the Valley is constantly changing. Unbeknownst to me, by reclaiming that long-abandoned vineyard, I'd leapt right into the political fires of Napa land use circa 1971. That political firestorm has not changed one iota for the past 50 years.

Are there any lessons I can share from 50 years of being a vintner on top of a mountain in the Napa Valley? There are no short cuts to growing and making fine wine; it's damn hard work. Have the courage of your

convictions. Be humble when dealing with Mother Nature. Know that the wine business is a people business; if you don't like people, you shouldn't be in the wine business. Bottom line, always be a critical thinker.

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