

A Night Out in Seattle with Charles Smith

By Ethan Fixell June 2, 2016



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Charles Smith is not only one of the best winemakers in Washington State—he's one of the best in the country. His [amazing wines](#) – known as much for their stellar quality as for their brilliantly austere packaging – have won him accolade after accolade over the last decade, including "Winemaker of the Year" from countless publications (including *Food & Wine*). But it's impossible to deny that it's the ex-rock band manager's polarizing personality as a brash party animal that has catapulted him to stardom.

So naturally, when Smith offered to show me his favorite bars and restaurants in Georgetown -- the Seattle neighborhood that is home to his new urban winery, Jet City -- I jumped at the opportunity. Over the course of nearly seven hours with Smith and his Director of Winemaking, Brennon Leighton, I'd attempt to verify the rumors of his reputation as an outrageous egotist and roisterer -- but not without nearly dying of alcohol poisoning in the process.

[Jet City](#) – 5:30pm

I arrive just a few minutes ahead of Smith, whose trademark wild hair is contained in a black knit hat. He's in his typical uniform of jeans and a black tee. But he's also donning something special today: a pristine plaid Pendleton shirt. The guy just *looks* famous.

Leighton pulls out a bottle of 2013 Sixto Uncovered Chardonnay and a bottle of 2014 Sixto Frenchman Hills. I'm informed that the '14 needs more time in the bottle before release, but the guys graciously give me the chance to see what a difference a year makes. (Answer: a ton.)

After a few delicious sips of a '13 Frenchman Hills, Leighton pulls out a fourth bottle, but Smith stops him. "We're not going to drink that," he says. "We're gonna go drink beer and get fucked up!"

[Lucky Liquor Tavern](#) – 7:06pm

With its pinball machines, well drinks and grizzled clientele, Lucky Liquor is an honest dive bar unsullied by hipster elbows. The crew in here is a motley one: I spy a burly, bearded man downing Budweiser next to a younger, clean-cut tattooed guy taking shots in a heavy metal tee, next to a dude in a bright orange construction worker's vest inhaling a hamburger. The bartender is a tough, attractive blonde woman who calls everyone "sweetie," but clearly takes zero-point-zero shit.

"This is what every bar in Seattle once looked like," Smith informs me.

As I finish my Manny's Pale Ale (a local staple from [Georgetown Brewing](#)), I pull out a Visa to pay for our drinks. Smith looks at me like I've just spit on the bartender.

"They take *cash* at the bar," he says, noticeably appalled, and drops a twenty on the counter before leaving my bourgeois ass behind in the dust.

[Slim's Last Chance](#) – 7:51pm

There's no one but the three of us and the bartender when we arrive at Slim's, but Bad Religion is blasting and the Chopper's Red Ale -- another popular Georgetown brew -- is cold and tasty.

Bad Religion soon makes way for the Ramones, as "Blitzkrieg Bop" begins playing overhead. "Can we just talk about how awesome the Ramones are?" asks Leighton. And we do, until I

notice a bottle of [Velvet Devil Merlot](#) behind the bar – their wine is the sole vino offering amidst a wide array of brown and white liquor.

"Yeah, that bottle above ours is here because of us, too," Smith says, pointing to a bottle of [Mezcal Nuestra Soledad](#).

Leighton explains that, as regulars and purveyors of wine for the bar, their requests for carrying this mezcal had been fulfilled.

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"Not into whiskey?" I ask.

"Brown liquor sucks," they respond, nearly in unison.

"Maybe we can all drink mezcal together sometime," I suggest, the little brother trying to keep up with his cooler older siblings.

"We can do it right now," Smith responds. "Drink your fucking beer."

Fonda la Catrina – 8:30pm

We may be 1,500 miles from the border, but I take one look at Fonda la Catrina's menu and know that this is one legit Mexican joint.

Smith takes the lead by ordering some Chicken Tacos Dorados, which we wash down with \$22 glasses of [Pierde Almas Tobaziche Mezcal](#). "We don't *want* to drink expensive shit," Smith explains. "We want to drink *good* shit. We wish it was \$5 a glass."

Smith and Leighton love mezcal for its purity – as with wine, the terroir of the plant is apparent in each glass. But I discover that they love cocktails, too, when I come back from the bathroom to a round of margaritas. As I pick mine up, Smith stops me, pulling my straws out before they hit my mouth. "We don't need fucking straws."

I chug my margarita like a man.

Via Tribunali – 9:30pm

We've got a healthy buzz going when we arrive at Via Tribunali, Smith and Leighton's favorite authentic Neapolitan pizzeria. Smith immediately orders a bottle of [Ca dei Zago](#) Col Fondo Prosecco and some prosciutto. The server asks if we'd like some burrata to go with it, but Charles is nodding "no" before she can finish asking. The man just wants meat.

Soon, I'm marveling at how perfectly a 2010 [Fontodi Chianti Classico](#) pairs with the wood-fired sausage, pepperoni, and fresh mozzarella pie that has just arrived at our table. Smith hasn't

steered us wrong yet all night – his knowledge of food and wine and the confidence with which he dispenses it makes me feel as if I'm in the presence of a Yoda-like figure (if Yoda had a chip on his shoulder rather than a robe).

But when Smith bristles at a comment I make about having great respect for Master Sommeliers, I can't help but challenge him by saying that, despite his unbelievable knowledge of wine, he probably couldn't pass the service portion of the Master Sommelier exam without studying. And when he claims that he certainly *could*, and I push back once again, explaining that the service portion covers a very specific set of standards that he'd likely have to—at the very least—brush up on first, his eyes go wide and he points at me, declaring, "I will jump over this table and tackle you LIKE A FUCKING BEAR."

The topic of sommeliers does not come up again.

9 LB Hammer – 11:15pm

I'm drunk now. Unquestionably drunk. I think I can hear my liver softly weeping.

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But on the way over to 9 LB Hammer, Smith had gotten me too psyched about the 9 LB Porter that Georgetown brews exclusively for the bar to give up now. And so, I assume I can handle one more drink when I order up three beers, and produce a \$20 bill to pay. That is, until my hand knocks into one of these glasses of sticky, pitch black ale that spills entirely onto Smith's Pendleton shirt.

As Smith silently springs into action, jumping back to assess the damage, Leighton says it all: "Oh, no." Leighton then explains that the Pendleton is vintage wool. Rare. Irreplaceable. And worth at least \$300.

My body is melting into the floor as I grapple with the humiliation of having just clumsily ruined everything with a flick of an arm. Now I know how Magneto felt when that bullet he deflected accidentally hit Professor X in the spine.

At least I paid in cash for the drinks this time?

Smith is decidedly not stoked about the ruined flannel. But after a few terrifying moments during which I fear for my life, he seems to forgive me. "It's just a shirt," he eventually says.

Soon, we're talking about his Pendleton collection (he owns too many to count), Northwestern punk and indie bands like Dead Moon (both Smith and Leighton's favorite), and what it's like to be a dad (he has a beloved daughter named Charlotte, whom he's even named a wine after).

Yes, he knows he's a great winemaker, and has no problem reminding anyone. And yes, he has the ability to drink as much as a dozen attendees at a Russian wedding. But behind the bombastic

braggadocio is a sensitive soul who is as passionate as a skilled artisan obsessed with his craft can be. And that sounds to me like someone I'd want making my wine.