

Charles Smith Is Making Wine More Fun and Less Pretentious

By [Jeremy Repanich](#)

November 7, 2016



Eric Becker

Charles Smith's Ford Excursion turned off the road and sidled up to a tiny vineyard just over the Oregon-Washington state line. The winemaker—dressed in his usual uniform of black jeans and a black t-shirt—hopped out of his SUV and ambled between some Syrah vines as workers harvested grapes that would arrive at his urban winery nearly 300 miles away in Seattle less than 24 hours later. Among the pickers, Smith's attire looked more suited for backstage at a concert for one of the bands he used to manage instead of this rural expanse in the Walla Walla Valley.

A farmer from the neighboring apple orchard wandered over upon seeing Smith and greeted him warmly. They discussed the chance that an early frost may come and damage their respective crops, as they ate some freshly picked apples on the back of the farmer's flatbed truck. These men had for more in common than aesthetics would have let on. After comparing notes on their respective harvests, they both chucked their apple cores in between some trees, bid each other

adieu and were on their way. Smith may have looked out of place when he arrived, but certainly not as he left.

The 55-year-old Smith is used to appearing incongruous in the wine world. From his personal appearance, to his iconic black-and-white wine labels that bear little resemblance to most other bottles, he's playing a bit of a different game than other wine professionals. On one hand, he doesn't present himself like a grizzled farmer/winemaker; on the other, his attire and unruly mane of long curly hair seem at odds with the stereotypical notions of a wine aficionado. But peeling back the layers, you see appearances are deceiving, and Smith will tell you as much.

“I make traditional wine with contemporary packaging,” Smith says. “I don't want to re-interpret something that's been perfected and perfected for centuries. I'm not trying to create a new style through winemaking, I'm continuing a style that's evolved through wine growing.”



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The wine Smith makes—and as Washington State's fourth-largest producer, he makes a lot—can be found under many different names and ranging from \$12 to \$150. His original label, [K Vintners](#) predominantly features Syrah because of how well it grows in the Walla Walla Valley. The [Wines of Substance](#) brand sells Cab, Merlot and Sauvignon. And his [eponymous label](#)—which he recently [sold for \\$120 million](#)—has bottles you've probably seen at the grocery store, including Velvet Devil Merlot, Boom Boom Syrah and Kung Fu Girl Riesling. And there's more labels beyond those. By producing so many delicious wines at multiple price points, Smith is

backing up his belief that wine doesn't have to be expensive to be worth drinking. And you don't have to be alienated from it because you're not steeped in wine's heritage and lore.

I sat down with the Washington's most iconic winemaker to better understand his philosophy on wine, why fermented grape juice seems to intimidate people and tips on how people just starting out with wine can feel more comfortable.

What accounts for many people's resistance to wine? So many guys I run into just want to dismiss it out of hand as pretentious.

In a lot of ways, it's how it has been marketed in America. They made it seem high epicurean and expensive. But in Italy or France, wine is on every table because wine is food. There's an idea that wine is for every table at every meal—maybe not breakfast, but I do defy that sometimes—and that's it. If that's the communication, then people will understand that it's just something that should always be there because it's just a good part of a meal.

Was your branding and bottles to combat that notion that idea that wine was pretentious?

No, it was really about communication. Most people don't speak wine, therefore using contemporary packaging was all about communication. If you see a bottle of wine from France, made by a winery that's been around for 100 years, you go, there's nothing about that that speaks to contemporary world. The wine is classic, the label is classic and it's a snapshot of its time, and that's cool. I really like that. But I didn't start my winery in 1908, I started it in 1999. I wanted to simplify it to be more direct and more honest. The label is clear, distinct and allows me a lot of latitude to do a lot of different expressions while using the same color palate. Fortunately, people have responded and it works.

Have we intellectualized wine too much?

It's amazing, because as I said, wine was never meant to be about. But wine is so individual and evolving that people tend to want to talk about it because they find it compelling. Sometimes when I drink wine, I don't want to talk about it. I just want to drink it, because that's what it's all about.



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There feels like such a high barrier to entry for wine.

It's okay to not know anything about wine. It's not okay to not want to enjoy wine. Don't be afraid to ask questions of experts at the restaurant or wine shop and gain access to knowledge. That way you don't have to be intimidated because you're not trying to prove that you know anything, you're just proving that you want to discover something. For guys, I'm a single a guy, and women like wine, so guys should like it too!

Okay, how do they get started when they're at a restaurant?

Start really simple. Red or white? Then have an idea how much you want to spend. It's ok to up front tell them what you want to spend on a bottle. If you don't want to spend over \$40 for a bottle of wine just say that. Once they know your budget, it narrows down the options for them to direct you to. Then just think style, not necessarily you have to know to say cabernet or Syrah right off the bat, but characteristics. Do you like it fruity, dry, light body, full body? These are very simple things that can help someone else lead you to something good. Answer those questions and then you'll know price and basic style, so any competent server or somm will be able to put something in your hand that you'll enjoy. You just have to trust that someone has more knowledge than you and not feel less than because you don't have the knowledge. We all start from zero knowledge and we build from there.

And drink a ton of it.

Yeah! You learn by doing. You want to learn a lot about wine? Then just drink a lot of wine.