

## Rocking it in Washington

### Charles Smith does wine his way

Bill Daley



With his kinky long hair, omnipresent shades and rebel demeanor, Charles Smith looks more like the rock band manager he once was than a respected winemaker. Yet it's his self-styled "rock" attitude that has earned him a global wine reputation in less than 10 years and helped put the spotlight on wines from Washington state.

Food & Wine magazine's winemaker of the year for 2009, Smith loves all kinds of wine, and you see it in his wide-ranging line, from the kicky Kung Fu Girl riesling priced for easy-sipping at \$12 to his elegant, artisanal takes on syrah, many of which sell for \$100 and up — if you can buy them before they sell out. What uni es his brand, whether it's his top-shelf K Vintners or his more inex-

pensive Charles Smith Wines, are kicky names, eye-catching black-and-white labels and a willingness to push the envelope in ways both wonderful and wacky.

"I get to make wine for a living — how cool is that?" he said. "I get all the wine I can drink, and I get paid. I feel like a kid in the candy store."

You can tell Smith is having loads of fun. Who else (with the possible exception of uber-punster Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon) would focus on syrah and call his winery K, as in "K syrah"? Who else would take a sangiovese and syrah blend, call it "Guido" and slap on a \$40 price tag? Who else would be watching the final scenes of Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill" with his label designer, Rikke Kor , and start to visualize a riesling bottle emblazoned with a faceless Kung Fu girl in full battle stance?

Even what he calls the "un-label" for The Boy, a plain white rectangle with the words "The Boy" printed in small type in the lower right hand corner, has a story. Since this was not going to be a syrah, he wanted to move the wineries signature "K" to the back label. That left the front label unadorned and completely blank. He thought the grenache/syrah blend reminded him of France and Chateauneuf-du-Pape, and that led, in steps, to the name, itself based on a quote by the famed French singer and songwriter Serge Gainsbourg: "I'm the boy who can enjoy invisibility."

Smith has been most definitely not invisible almost from his start in winemaking with K Vintners in 2001. He says he wasn't a total wine novice; he had worked at wineries in his native California and as a sommelier in high-end restaurants.

"If you've eaten a thousand pizzas and you've seen people make pizza but you've never made one yourself, chances are you will be able to make a pretty good pizza," he explained. "Same with wine. The winemakers thought we were just having a conversation. I was taking notes."

Smith chose to work in Washington instead of California because the field wasn't crowded.

"I wanted to be there at the beginning," he said.

Now, Smith is near his 10th anniversary at K Vintners. He's not planning on slowing down.

"I want to make better wine, and I want to do things I haven't done yet," he said. "I want to make the greatest white wine ever produced in Washington State."

He thinks he has it, a single-vineyard viognier, in the barrel now with a target release of fall 2011. If syrah can do so well in Washington, he reasons, why not other Rhone grapes like viognier? So far, he's pleased with the white's progress.

"It's pretty mind-blowing," Smith said.

