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DEC. 15, 2010
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Pathbreakers

Harvey Steiman

Issue: December 15, 2010

CHARLES SMITH THE MARKETER

K VINTNERS, CHARLES SMITH WINES AND THE MAGNIFICENT WINE CO. / ESTABLISHED 1999

Charles Smith understands what it takes to make killer wines: great vineyards, low yields and minimal intervention in wine-making. And his artistic, subtly subversive black-and-white labels are what make these wines sell.

Irreverent, opinionated, brash and sometimes rude, Smith in person seems every bit the rock band manager he was for 11 years. It was in 1999, as he was approaching his 40th birthday, that he knew he had to do something else. "I was 39 years old, living in Copenhagen, and [my] band wasn't making much money," he says. "I decided to come back home and do a road trip."

Back in the States, he drank a bottle of Seven Hills Merlot Walla Walla Valley 1994 in Seattle that intrigued him enough to make him point his car toward Walla Walla. Fortuitously, he ran into Christophe Baron at a barbecue. Baron, who was just starting Cayuse, convinced Smith to start his own winery in Walla Walla. He even sold him some grapes, mostly Syrah.

Smith called the winery K Vintners, a sideways pun. "'K Syrah' would have been too kitsch," he says. "K Vintners removes it a step." The labels sport a serif letter K that resembled a Western cattle brand. A sans-serif K adorns the wines made from non-Walla Walla sources.

A bit rustic at first, the wines had plenty of complex flavors without being massive. An immediate hit, they got even better after enologist Andrew Latta arrived in 2006 to tidy up the winemaking.

In 2004, when a winter freeze devastated Walla Walla grapes, Smith formed the Magnificent Wine Co. to generate some cash flow with an inexpensive blend. Milbrandt Vineyards on Wahluke Slope grew the grapes and made the wine. He called it House Wine, and the label says as much in 2 1/2-inch hand-drawn letters.

"I was tired of faux European stories," he says. "I wanted it to be American, to say American. The world didn't need another wine, but it needed someone to communicate the language of it." In 2006 he sold a majority stake in Magnificent Wine Co. to Precept Wine Brands, but remains involved.

The association with Milbrandt blossomed into Charles Smith Wines: The Modernist Project. "Calling it a project freed me up from thinking of it as a winery," he explains. "I could put anything in there, from inexpensive varietals to the kind of big, powerful wines I could not make at KV."

The first label, for Kung Fu Girl, a refreshing and varietally correct 2007 Riesling made



from Milbrandt's Evergreen Vineyard, was inspired by a scene from the film *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*, and featured a drawing of a female martial artist in a snowy scene. The next, a Chardonnay called *Eve*, showed a bite out of a giant apple. On the Syrah, called *Boom Boom*, a cartoon bomb, fuse lit, seems ready to explode. The wines sell for \$20 or less.

"This is what I am most proud of," Smith says. "It allows everybody to have access to good wine." There are 35,000 cases of *Kung Fu Girl 2009*, at \$12. "I don't know of any single-vineyard wine in the world at that price and that much volume," he adds.

The project is also home to Smith's most expensive bottles, including a \$100 Syrah called *Royal City*. It is powerful, with an unbuttoned riot of complex flavors on a massive frame. The source is a vineyard he helped revive after a death in the family allowed it to go to seed. A drawing of a gigantic crown fills the label. Smith also makes *Heart*, *Skull* and *Old Bones*, each with labels that reflect his rock 'n' roll background.

Whatever the wines and however he labels them, Smith follows a simple motto: "Make 'em curious. Be respectful. And deliver."

BEST VALUES

89pts Charles Smith Riesling Columbia Valley Kung Fu Girl Evergreen Vineyard 2009 • \$12

Light and fragrant, on the dry side, featuring tangy grapefruit and apple flavors that linger gently. Drink now.—*H.S.*

RATINGS

December 15, 2010

97pts 2006 Charles Smith "Royal City" Syrah, Stoneridge Vineyard A majestic wine, smooth, round and profuse with its blueberry, plum and black currant fruit, nicely wrapped in fine tannins and shaded with hints of white pepper and roasted meat. Big and profound, but not extra-weighty. Complex and beautifully balanced. Best from 2011 through 2017.

96pts 2007 K Syrah "Northridge" So concentrated it feels like the essence of Syrah. A glowing ball of red and black cherry, pomegranate and plum flavors lights up a galaxy of tobacco, allspice, crème brûlée and black pepper grace notes, coming together harmoniously on the very long finish. This has power, but doesn't weigh down the palate. Drink now through 2020.

95pts 2007 K "Roma" En Chamberlin Explosive, intense flavors of ripe cherry, pomegranate, black olive and tomato leaf ride easily, almost airily, over a refined structure. The tannins are nicely submerged, and the flavors seem to whoosh through the finish. Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Drink now through 2017.

95pts 2007 K "Ovide" En Cerise Big and generous, but stays light enough on its feet to make the powerful black olive-scented currant, plum and peppery spice flavors sing with refinement. An undercurrent of minerality adds interest and depth, and the finish persists impressively. Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Best from 2012 through 2020.

94pts 2007 K Syrah "The Deal" Sundance Vineyard Ripe and spicy, this is a big wine that deftly balances its powerful blackberry, plum and fresh currant fruit against cedar, black pepper and bacon flavors, lingering on the tightly packed finish. Best from 2012 through 2020.

94pts 2007 K "The Creator" Rich, ripe and round, brimming with black olive, blackberry, cherry and spice flavors that glide easily and appealingly over a polished frame. The finish doesn't quit, but strikes an elegant balance, with refined power. Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Best from 2012 through 2019.

93pts 2007 K Syrah "Phil Lane" Ripe fruit, earth and tar notes combine to produce complex and powerful flavors in this big, brawny Syrah. There's black cherry and currant at the core, with dead leaf and soy sauce notes poking in from the side. Massive structure needs time to soften. Best after 2013.

93pts 2007 K Syrah "Pheasant Vineyard" Rich in texture and flavor, this is plump, offering polished tannins and blueberry, plum, cream and spice flavors that just won't quit on the finish. Shows intensity, early complexity, balance and supple grace. Drink now through 2017.

93pts 2007 K "The Boy" Delicious stuff, this is bold in flavor but light in texture. Plum, pomegranate and black olive character at the core drives the profile, which floats pepper and spice notes on the long finish. Grenache and Syrah. Drink now through 2014.

92pts 2007 K Syrah "Morrison Lane" Dark and dense, a brooding wine, offering savory roasted meat and charred pepper notes around a tight core of roasted fig, dried currant and black olive. Distinctive stuff, but this will take years to show what it has. Best after 2013.

91pts 2009 K Viognier Polished and generous, showing a raw fruit edge to the lingering pear, apricot and spice flavors. This is lively, not unctuous, and could develop nicely with cellaring. Drink now through 2013.

89pts 2008 K Syrah "Mibrandt" Polished, velvety, fresh and appealing for its black olive and roasted tomato nuances around a core of plum and berry fruit. Shows some style. Drink now through 2014.

HARVEY STEIMAN'S RECOMMENDED VALUES FROM WASHINGTON

89pts 2009 Charles & Charles Rosé Volume II A light and fragrant rosé, delivering a pomegranate note that adds charm to the berry and citrus flavors. Syrah.