

Charles Smith is the rock manager who became one of the world's most successful winemakers. Photographer and writer Claes Lofgren met him in Seattle, Washington State.

The meeting with Charles Smith was something I was really looking forward to during my tour of Washington. Charles has an exciting background as a rock manager in Denmark, but after a couple of years there he returned to Seattle with a newfound interest in wine.

During a wine tour in Walla Walla, he ran into Frenchman Christophe Baron and became enthusiastic about the region's wines. Smith put up \$5,000, bought grapes, and borrowed space and equipment from Baron. There, with a little help, he made his first vintage in 1999. He wanted to borrow more money to continue, but the bank just laughed at him. With a few bottles under his arm, he still managed to persuade them. In 2001, he released 330 cases of his first wine, K Vintners Syrah Walla Walla Valley, which sold out immediately.

With charisma and a certain amount of madness, over twenty years he has built up an empire of over thirty different brands with idiosyncratic labels designed by Levi Strauss & Co's former head of design, Danish Rikke Korff.

The wines should have power, balance and personality and the character of the grape should be noticeable, Smith often says.

Kung Fu Girl Riesling and Boom Boom Syrah quickly became big sellers at the lower end of the market, so when he received a proposal in 2016 to sell his five most popular brands for \$120 million to the giant Constellation, he jumped at the chance. Charles signed a contract as a consultant for another three years, after which he let go of the helm. With that kind of money, you can choose which way you want to go. Retire or move on? He chose full speed ahead and built Seattle's coolest tasting room in a run-down area right by the Boeing factory's runway.

I arrive early and the tasting room hasn't opened. I am let in anyway and can look around a bit. A large hall is bustling with activity as some of last year's wines are being bottled. The winemaker in charge, Brennon Leighton, with a past at Ste. Michelle, appears and shows me around. He tells me about their philosophy, making the best possible wines with no added cultured yeast, gentle pressing in vertical presses, minimal clarification and filtration. They farm organically without certification. Traditional, old-fashioned winemaking, pure and simple. For a company that makes about half a million cases of wine, that sounds incredible. That makes them Washington's fourth largest producer. And that's after selling the best sellers!

Right on schedule for our interview is Charles Smith. There have been so many rumors about this man and stories that he can be moody, so I'm a little nervous. Quite unnecessarily, it turns out. He is very accommodating and pleasant. We talk a bit about Denmark and Sweden, two countries he really likes.

When asked if it wasn't difficult to sell such a large part of his brands, the answer came quickly - and honestly: "I come from a family with small circumstances, when an offer like this comes, there's no doubt, it's a lot of money!" Charles currently has six different lines of wines.

The first is K Vintners, syrah-based wines in small batches at quite high prices. Sixto was created when he and Brennan found high, cool vineyards perfectly situated for chardonnay. The wines in the series come from different vineyards, but all have a distinct Burgundian expression. Substance was first conceived for affordable Cabernet and Chardonnay. Wines with substance in larger editions. It's a huge success and today sauvignon blanc, pinot noir and merlot are part of the brand.

- Anyone can make good and expensive wines if they have a little knowledge and access to good grapes. I want to make wine that ordinary people can afford," Charles says emphatically.

I ask if he means like Guigal, their Côte du Rhône is a bargain for the price, while they make some of the world's best Syrah wines. - Absolutely! That's exactly what I mean! My wine will earn its

place in your glass. Charles is clearly excited by the exchange and obviously enjoys the comparison.

Vino Casa Smith wines are Italian-inspired and made from the most common red and green Italian grapes. Head winemaker Brennon Leighton has his own range where he is free to use less common grapes in small batches.

Charles Smith's latest project, however, has left many shaking their heads. Golden West is a venture into pinot noir on a large scale. They planted 150 hectares in 2016, the same year Charles sold part of his production. Pinot noir has not been a great success in Washington because the grape is delicate like a prima donna and can't tolerate too much moisture or too much heat and sun. - I had success with riesling and chardonnay, why not make world-class pinot noir?" says Charles.

The vineyard is on the Columbia River, on the same latitude as Pommard in Burgundy. The soil is 50% limestone - great conditions for first-class pinot noir. The grapes grow at an altitude of 500 meters for coolness and yields are kept low for concentration. We head into the oak barrels where the barrel samples show that great wines are on the way. The first vintage was 2018, but he has been a little reticent about the wines until now, when he sees how they have developed. - "There's so much talk about wine, some people seem to believe their own bullshit. For me, the answer is always in the glass! I think my pinot noir venture will be my legacy in the Washington wine industry!

Many of the wines are produced in the old industrial building, but most are produced in Walla Walla, where Charles also has two tasting rooms. The whole style is decidedly rocky, but I still think Charles Smith has a great attitude. As a self-taught winemaker, he and Brennan Leighton have created something amazing.

But when I ask him about it, he says "It's just wine, drink it!" |