

Smith-Madrone: Tasting a Napa Valley pioneer

Elin McCoy ventures to Napa Valley's Spring Mountain District to taste at Smith-Madrone, known for its age-worthy, balanced wines that also tend to be released at relatively reasonable prices...

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Smith-Madrone vineyards in Spring Mountain, Napa Valley. Credit: Matthew Denny / Smith-Madrone

Smith-Madrone is one of Napa Valley's pioneer estates. It was founded in 1971 by Stuart Smith, known as Stu, who is here for this tasting and is sporting a greying beard and impressive brush moustache as the morning light streams into the ivy-covered barn winery high on Spring Mountain.

A long table with a white cloth, dozens of glasses, and red napkins is surrounded by French barrels stacked four high. The oldest wine on the table, a Cabernet, was made here 40 years ago.

Stu's brother, Charles (Charlie), is opening bottles of Riesling, Chardonnay, and Cabernet. His beard and moustache are white. The two engage in back-and-forth banter that resembles a good stage routine. It feels like a Napa scene from several decades ago.

In many ways, Smith-Madrone is a throwback to an era before wineries resembled Tuscan villas, before cult Cabernets cost \$500-plus a bottle, and before Ferraris lined streets in St. Helena far below.

The Smiths are proudly old school in their winemaking philosophy, the age-worthy, balanced wines they make, the reasonable prices they charge, and the homely way they welcome visitors. The winery is the tasting room. The guides are the Smith brothers, or Stu's son Sam, who is now assistant winemaker.

What makes Smith-Madrone so compelling is its authenticity in a glitzy place devoted to image maintenance.

After nearly 50 years, this is still a small estate winery whose reds and whites reflect the beliefs of two men who don't tone down their opinions, whether controversial or not.

Though respected, the Chardonnay, Riesling, and two Cabernets rarely make trophy lists and have never grabbed as much attention as they should. That's why I headed to the winery to taste their history and find out what's happening now.

A mountain heritage

From downtown St. Helena, it takes 20 minutes to navigate the six miles of steep road and hairpin curves to the winery, 1,900 feet above the valley floor – and that's if someone who knows the way is driving. Being a mountain winery is central to Smith-Madrone's identity and the wines' personalities.

Scouting a place for a vineyard, Stu first walked this land in 1970. 'I believed then very strongly, as did Virgil in 43 BC, that wine loves the hills,' he says, ready with a historical overview.

Smith-Madrone at a glance

Founder: Stuart Smith

Founded: 1971

Location: Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley

Annual production: 3,000 to 4,000 cases

Vineyards: 38 acres, dry-farmed, first planted 1972

Elevation 1,300 to 2,000 feet

Soil: Volcanic-based Aiken Stony Clay loam

Grapes planted: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Riesling

Wines produced: Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cook's Flat Reserve, Rosé

Old redwood stakes revealed vineyards were here in the 1880s, part of a land grant to George Cook, but phylloxera destroyed the vines and they were abandoned. Picholine olive trees, 120 years old, frame a Valley floor view.

We head out to the best vantage point to look at the winery's 15.3 hectares of vineyards, some of which have 34-degree slopes. The soil is Aiken Stoney Clay loam, volcanic based, deep rust-red, and studded with rocks.

While at UC Davis, Stu joined with family and friends to buy 81 hectares (200 acres) that stretch from 1,300 to 2,000 feet (610 metres) in elevation.

His brother helped him log one million board feet of timber (2,360 cubic metres), pulling out massive roots by hand. They named the property after its predominant tree, the red-trunked Madrone. At the time the Valley had fewer than 30 wineries.

'That was the era of the Joe Heitz model of starting a winery,' Stu explains. 'You studied oenology and worked at everything as opposed to making money in some other industry and then buying your way in.'

In 1972, the Smiths planted two hectares (five acres) each of Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Riesling, all on their own roots.

Their first Riesling, 1977, put them on the world wine map when it was named the 'Best Riesling in the World' in 1979 at an international competition sponsored by Gault-Millau.

Timeline

1971 Stuart Smith founds the winery on Spring Mountain

1972 The vineyard is planted to Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir

1973 Charles Smith, Stu's brother, joins the winery full time

1977 The first wine, a Riesling, is produced

1979 The 1977 Riesling wins "Best Riesling" award at Gault-Millau Wine Olympics

1986 The Smiths graft Pinot Noir vines over to Chardonnay

1998 The brothers begin replanting the vineyard on phylloxera resistant rootstock

2000 For the first time, the estate Cabernet includes Merlot and Cabernet Franc

2007 The first vintage of Cook's Flat Reserve, a high-end Cabernet blend

2013 Sam Smith, Stu's son, joins winery full-time

2018 The winery produces the first rosé

They finally abandoned Pinot Noir, grafting over the vines to Chardonnay in 1986, added a reserve Cabernet Sauvignon named Cook's Flat in 2007 and a rosé in 2018.

Terroir and the Smith-Madrone philosophy

Spring Mountain District, an AVA since 1993, is an area of the Mayacamas mountain range named for the hundreds of underground springs and is the coolest and wettest Napa's sub-region.

More than half the plantings are Cabernet, but I've never found the wines share a particular flavour profile.

Instead, the AVA is touted for its 'mountain men.'

Fritz Maytag, owner of York Creek Vineyards, once told me the District's winemakers are freer, tougher, more independent and contrarian, all of which describes the Smith brothers.

Though Riesling plantings in the Valley have dwindled to one-twentieth of what they were in 1979, for example, the Smiths are committed to it, and their version remains Napa's finest, with classic varietal character.

At the heart of their philosophy – and their success – are mountain terroir and dry farming. 'Think of tomatoes,' Stu says. 'If you water them every day, they have no flavor. The same is true of grapes. Avoiding irrigation makes more concentrated wines.'

Given California's recurring droughts, that's a challenge. Since 2017, the Smiths water vines if needed at the beginning of veraison.

While they are all-in on sustainable farming, don't ask Stu about biodynamics unless you want a lecture on why science is so important to viticulture and winemaking. For a time, he authored a website titled 'Biodynamics is a Hoax.'

Tweaking the Old School Style

'What distinguishes Spring Mountain wines is structure,' says Charlie, and Smith-Madrone's Cabernets have it.

The duo championed unfiltered, unfinned wines long before Robert Parker Jr made the idea popular.

Their firm, balanced, complex reds show off cedary, herbal aromas and spicy-savoury dark fruit flavors and age for decades. The barrel-fermented Chardonnays are the opposite of the oaky, buttery style, with distinctive floral aromas, succulence and racy acidity.

But in 1997, they began re-evaluating everything they'd been doing.

Phylloxera forced them to replant on resistant rootstock, starting in 1998, and the Smiths took it as a do-over opportunity. They changed row orientation from east-west to northeast-southwest so the vines got substantial morning sun, but were shaded in late afternoon. They also changed spacing and trellising.

The early Chardonnays had been pretty austere, so they embraced malolactic fermentation and new oak, and about six years ago added batonnage. They seem to have hit a lemon-scented, mineral sweet spot.

In the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, the estate red was 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, but they planted Merlot and Cabernet Franc and added these to the blend in 2000, giving the wine more complexity.

They wish now they'd planted more of the latter. Until the 1980s they aged the estate red in French oak, then turned to American because it cost less.

'But the difference between American and French oak is like the difference between *Baywatch* and Sophia Lauren,' says Charles, and since the mid-2000s they're back to French, and have reduced the percentage of new barrels. The result is more elegance and brightness than ever.

With the 2007 vintage, they introduced a much more expensive Cabernet reserve wine that shows off more power and intensity.

'We kept tasting expensive Napa Cabs that were just yuck. Cook's Flat is our attempt to compete with the first growths,' says Stu. The 2016 is their best yet.

What's next?

Sam Smith, Stu's son, who sports a dark beard and moustache, now works full-time at the winery, but the long-term picture isn't yet clear.

Making great wine, they say, is no longer enough. ‘So much money is coming in that it makes me wonder how we can compete against millionaires who can lose money year after year,’ says Stu.

‘We’re not sports stars or celebrities. We don’t do Corinthian columns.’ They worry that regulations and the costs of permits will drive small producers out of the business.

For sure, they’ll continue to fight for the right to plant on Napa’s hillsides, a controversial view to local environmentalists. ‘All things being equal, the best grapes come from the mountains,’ insists Stu.

The Smiths know what matters to them, and the wines reflect their commitment to make wines they like. After all, they always have.



Left to Right: Sam Smith, Stu Smith, and Charles Smith

2018 Rosé



90 points: The winery experimented for several years before releasing this first vintage of rosé. In the watermelon-hued 50/50 blend of Cabernet Franc and Merlot, the Cab Franc element really stands out. Aromatically, it shows off luscious floral aromas of roses and the intense, succulent red berry fruit flavours coat your tongue. This is a serious rosé that would go well with food.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2022

2016 Chardonnay



91 points: The vintage had a near perfect growing season, ideal for Smith-Madrone's Chardonnay style, a mid-point between California's opulent stereotype and a new, fresher, more vibrant one. Barrel-fermented and aged in 80% new French oak, it's spicy and succulent, with aromas of hazelnut and lemon curd and a creamy texture that doesn't weigh it down.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2025



2016 Cabernet Sauvignon

94 points: The estate Cabernet is from mostly dry-farmed vines grown at the top of Spring Mountain at an elevation of 1,800 feet and in this vintage the sense of place shines through, especially with only 45% new oak used for barrel aging. It's very much a mountain Cabernet, with classic structure, cassis and graphite aromas, and deep, savoury red fruit flavours with hints of mint. The tannins are powerful but very fine.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2036



2016 Cook's Flat Reserve

96 points: This limited production Cabernet blend is a selection of the best barrels and the vintage was a near perfect growing season. The dark, intense colour promises more density and concentration than the Estate Cabernet. Explosive aromas of violets, mint, lavender, and fruit waft out of the glass and reflect the high proportion of Cabernet Franc; the layered flavours are intense, and the texture is smooth and concentrated. Wow.

Drinking Window 2021 – 2040



2016 Riesling

91 points: The dry Riesling has long had a dedicated following, and the winery is one of the few producers of the varietal left in Napa - think Alsace style. This vintage shows a stand-out wet rock minerality, succulent limey, citrusy notes, juicy acidity, and round texture. It's also the first vintage available in hand-waxed magnums, which makes sense because the wines are surprisingly long lived.

Drinking Window 2019 – 2029



2015 Riesling

93 points: The 2015 version of this always-reliable wine is racier and more exciting than the 2016 vintage. Its bright honeysuckle aromas explode from the glass, and the savoury, citrusy flavours have notes of mint and minerals. Fermented and aged in stainless steel, it has a purity and complexity that truly reflect its dry-farmed mountain terroir. The grapes were picked at the end of August.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2030



2015 Chardonnay

92 points: Chardonnay yields were much lower than usual at this dry-farmed mountain estate thanks to very cool spring weather. Harvest took place over two and a half weeks, and the wine was barrel-fermented and aged in 80% new oak. This golden-coloured wine comes with heady scents of baking spices and toasted hazelnuts. It's earthy and brioche-flavoured with rich pear and yellow apple notes, and combines crispness with power, texture and structure.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2024



2014 Chardonnay

92 points: This is a big, rich Chardonnay that reminds me of golden apples, tarte tatin, and marzipan. It finishes long and very pure, and the fact that the grapes are mountain grown really shines through in the depth. The fruit is so intense that it can support not just 100% barrel fermentation, but also 100% aging in new French oak.

Drinking Window 2019 – 2026



2014 Riesling

92 points: What stands out in this vintage is the wine's elegance and layered flavours that mix citrus, flowers, and an almost slatey minerality. Add to that the wine's typical honeysuckle and citrus aromas, fresh, zingy acidity and a long, long finish. It has enough substance to match with a wide variety of dishes, especially baked ham and roasted turkey.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2029



2013 Cook's Flat Reserve

94 points: Only 194 cases of this Cabernet Franc-dominant blend were made. Black cherries, tobacco and herbs dominate the tantalising aromas, which spill out of the glass. Generous and open, it's not as floral or dense as the 2016 and shows a kind of savoury, briary style. Unlike the Estate Cabernet, it's aged in 100% new French oak.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2038



2013 Cabernet Sauvignon

93 points: The earliest harvest in 25 years along with a practically flawless growing season resulted in a very structured mountain red with freshness, plus a delicious richness and super soft tannins. Peppery aromas and flavours stand out among the complex melange of savoury leafiness, dark cherries and plums, mint, earth, tobacco and cassis, and it's practically bouncing with acidity. The finish is long and elegant and it has more raciness than the 2012.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2038



2012 Cook's Flat Reserve

95 points: The name refers to the first owner of the property, George Cook. The one word that describes this Cabernet Sauvignon dominant blend is seductive. It has the rich, dark, velvety fruit and power that characterises the best wines in this vintage. So much is going on in this dense, concentrated wine with textbook graphite aromas, laced with cassis, dark chocolate, mint and cedar. The taste is leaner and more elegant than the expansive aromas lead you to expect.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2035



2012 Cabernet Sauvignon

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Drinking Window 2019 – 2035



2010 Riesling

91 points: Smith-Madrone's first Riesling was the 1977. The winery is among the few in Napa that are still committed to the varietal. This one comes from a 2.5ha parcel of vines with eastern exposure. This vintage was one of the coolest seasons in more than 40 years and is crisp, dry and tangy, with aromas of wintergreen and a whisper of sweetness. The biggest indication of age is a change in the texture of the wine.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2034



2009 Cook's Flat Reserve

94 points: This Cabernet Sauvignon-dominated (64%) wine is very architectural, with a powerful structure, yet still almost juicy. This is very much a mountain Cabernet, but at 10 years of age has a delicious velvety texture. What stands out are the layers of aromas and flavours, lavender and violets, mint and damp earth. The vines grow at elevations of 1,800 feet at a slope of 35% in red volcanic soil.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2030



2009 Cabernet Sauvignon

94 points: At 10 years of age, this wine is both appealing and impressive right now, with a distinct black cherry character, an almost juicy finish, and under 14% abv! The wine spent 22 months in French oak, which has all been absorbed. The lovely mint, earth, and olive notes to the flavours would pair perfectly with herb-roasted lamb.

Drinking Window 2019 – 2032



2007 Cabernet Sauvignon

93 points: From the beginning, critics raved about this vintage in Napa, but later many found the wines overripe and monolithic. Not this one. It's true to year, with swashbuckling richness and a dense, sleek texture, and still boasts a rich dark colour. It's 97% Cabernet Sauvignon, which gives it a powerful mountain character with a berry rich nose and long savoury flavours. It still needs time.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2029



2007 Cook's Flat Reserve

94 points: This was the first vintage of Cook's Flat Reserve, a selection of the best barrels of the year, and aged 100% in new French oak. The blend is different from the Estate Cabernet and has more oomph. This vintage is dark, dense, and very classy, bears some telltale signs of aging — cigar box, leather, a browning rim. Still, it's alive, pulsing with energy, generous with blackberry, currant, liquorice and at the same time, restrained and delicate.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2028



2002 Cabernet Sauvignon

90 points: With a bit of air, the wine is ready to drink right now. You feel like inhaling the complex nose of cassis, cigar box, and spices, and the flavours show warm fruit tones, mint, and quite a bit of savoury acidity. This wine was aged for 23 months in new American oak barrels, and it seems to show more spiciness than recent vintages aged in French oak.

Drinking Window 2019 – 2028



2001 Cabernet Sauvignon

95 points: The 2001 vintage was a stunner for Cabernet in Napa Valley, and this wine was really singing. Harmonious, vivid, with a very long, wonderfully smooth finish, this is a generous and seductive mountain wine that's almost yummy. It was aged in all-new white oak from Missouri, which has totally tamed the tannins. One of my favorites in the tasting.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2032



2001 Riesling

92 points: Very golden, with an expansive orange blossom and apricot nose. This wine is big and rich, with roundness and weight, a combination of minerality and succulent apricot and peach fruit. It has a very long finish with a sweet hint. The style is very much a mid-point between the Rheingau and Alsace. At 18 years of age, it is going strong.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2030



2000 Cabernet Sauvignon

91 points: The first vintage to blend in Merlot and Cabernet Franc, this vintage is still very dense, dark, and intense, like a rich mouthful of crushed fruit and earth and a soft, sink-in-to-it texture. Less layered in flavour than the 2001, it has an enticing spicy ripe cherry, truffle and floral nose. Like many vintages up until 2002, it's aged in all new American oak.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2029



1999 Cabernet Sauvignon

90 points: The last vintage to be 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, this wine is from a cool, moderate year, which translates into a wonderful range of complex aromas: spice, tobacco, mint, rose petals, damp earth and more. It's a mid-weight wine, concentrated and structured, with smooth earthy pungent flavours with a core of ripe fruit underneath, and prominent acidity in the finish. Drink now.

Drinking Window 2019 – 2026



1996 Riesling

94 points: Amazingly bright, fresh and appealing for a 23-year-old wine, this illustrates the longevity of the winery's Riesling. Apricot coloured, it has ripe peachy verve and zingy acidity, with mineral notes in the background, enticing flavours of succulent apricots, and a mere 11.9% abv. The 1.5% residual sugar (more than later bottlings), gives the wine a ripe versus tart balance.

Drinking Window 2019 – 2029



1995 Cabernet Sauvignon

91 points: This was a year of weather drama, with floods, heavy rain, a hailstorm in June, and a late harvest, but turned out some surprisingly fine wine. This 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, aged for 27 months in American oak, seems the most mineral in the tasting. The aromas are dark and intense, with hints of iron, balanced with big, deep flavours and fine structure that's turned velvety.

Drinking Window 2019 – 2027



1994 Cabernet Sauvignon

94 points: Considered a great year in Napa, this vintage was fairly cool. It produced complex, fleshy, showy wines with striking aromas and a lot of freshness and elegance. There's a distinct taste of coffee and pronounced floral notes to the aromas. At the time, the Smiths were picking by blocks, using a variety of fermentation techniques, including trying 21 days of extended-skin contact in closed tanks.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2028



1989 Cabernet Sauvignon

95 points: This was a doom and destruction vintage, as pickers scrambled to save grapes from pelting rain in a mid-October harvest. At the time, though, the Smith brothers thought it might be their best yet. Today, I'm wowed by the layers of aromas, from lavender to graphite to a bit of cocoa. The wine still has tons of power but it's packaged so well and only 12.9% abv!

Drinking Window 2019 – 2026

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1979 Cabernet Sauvignon

96 points: Only the winery's second vintage, this 40-year-old Cabernet is from a cool year. Poured from magnum, it was the most youthful of the older wines and showed only a tiny bit of browning. Most wines from the vintage were lean and austere, but right now this Cabernet is amazing for its age, showing expansive dark-toned aromas and flavours of liquorice, spice, mint, and earth.

Drinking Window 2019 - 2027