



Smith-Madrone's Spring Mountain Vineyard



Charles, Stu and Sam Smith

# SMITH-MADRONE

The antidote to California bling, this Napa Valley pioneer is known for its well-priced and ageworthy wines. **Elin McCoy** ventures up into the Spring Mountain District AVA to taste

**S**mith-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 (before the Covid-19 pandemic) 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 the streets in St Helena far below.

The Smiths are proudly old-school in their winemaking philosophy: the ageworthy, 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, controversial or not. Though respected, the Chardonnay, Riesling



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and two Cabernets rarely make trophy lists and have never grabbed as much attention as they should. That's why I headed here to taste their history and find out what's going on now.

## Mountain heritage

From downtown St Helena, it takes 20 minutes to navigate the 10km of steep road and hairpin curves to the winery, 580m 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. Old redwood stakes reveal 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 look at the winery's 15.5ha of vineyards, some of which have 34-degree slopes. The soil is Aiken stony clay loam: volcanic-based, deep rust-red and studded with rocks. While at California's UC Davis, Stu joined with family and friends to buy 81ha that stretch from 400m to 610m in elevation.

Photographs: Matthew Denny; Meg Smith

His brother helped him log 2,360 cubic metres of timber, 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 2ha each of Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Riesling, all on their own roots. Their first Riesling, the 1977 vintage, put them on the world wine map when it was named 'Best Riesling in the World' in 1979 at an international competition sponsored by Gault-Millau.

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 philosophy

Spring Mountain District, an AVA since 1993, is an area of the Mayacamas mountain range named for the hundreds of underground springs. It is the coolest and wettest of Napa's sub-regions. More than half the plantings are Cabernet, but I've never found the wines >

## SMITH-MADRONE AT A GLANCE

**Founded** 1971, Stuart Smith  
**Location** Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley  
**Annual production** 36,000 to 48,000 bottles  
**Vineyards** 15.5ha, dry-farmed, first planted 1972  
**Elevation** 400m to 610m  
**Soil** Volcanic-based Aiken stony clay loam  
**Grapes planted** Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Riesling  
**Wines produced** Estate Riesling, Estate Chardonnay, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Cook's Flat Reserve Cabernet, Rosé

## ‘The difference between American and French oak is like the difference between Baywatch and Sophia Lauren’

Charlie Smith

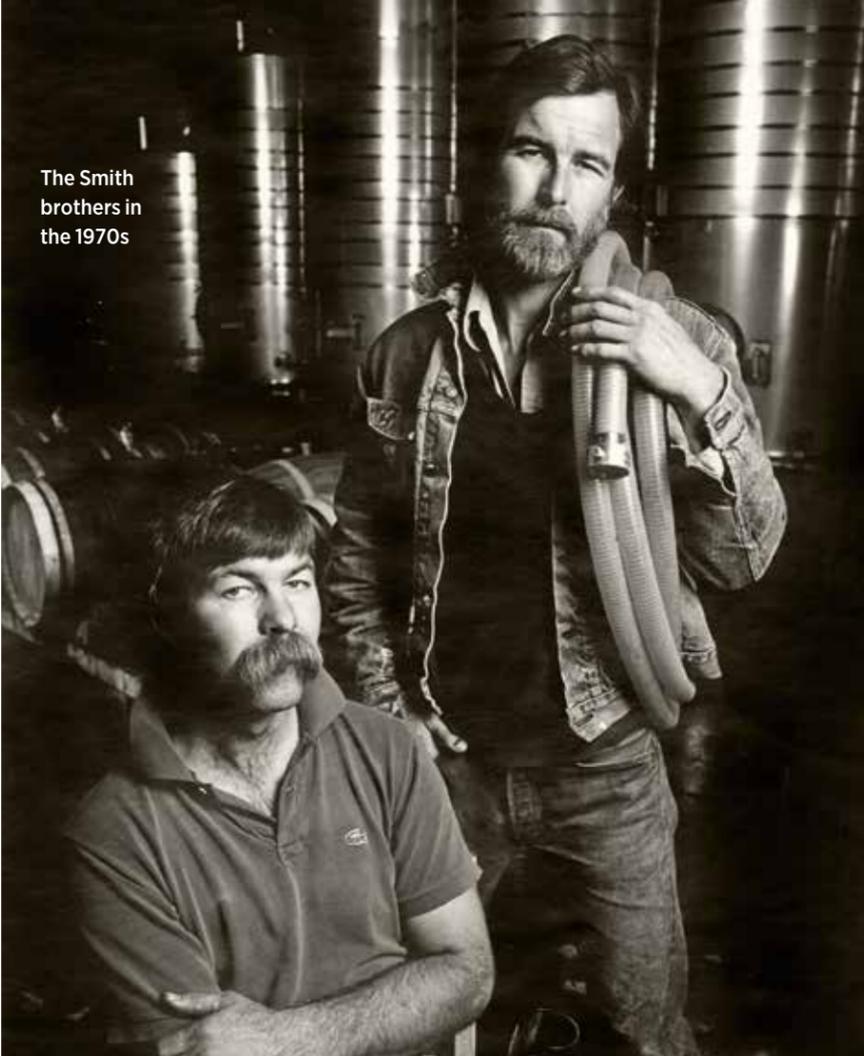
share a particular flavour profile. Instead, the AVA is touted for its ‘mountain men’. Fritz Maytag, owner of York Creek Vineyards, once told me the district’s winemakers are freer, tougher, more independent and contrarian – all of which describe the Smith brothers.

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 flavour. 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

Below: Smith-Madrone’s Spring Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon 2014



The Smith brothers in the 1970s

a time, in fact, he authored a website titled ‘Biodynamics is a Hoax’.

### Old style, new tweaks

‘What distinguishes Spring Mountain wines is structure,’ says Charlie, and Smith-Madrone’s Cabernets have it. The duo championed unfiltered, unfined 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 flavours 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. 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.

### SMITH-MADRONE: A TIMELINE

**1971** Stuart Smith founds the winery on Spring Mountain

**1972** Vineyard is planted to Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir

**1973** Charles Smith, Stuart’s brother, joins winery full time

**1977** First wine, a Riesling, is produced

**1979** The 1977 Riesling wins ‘Best Riesling’ at Gault-Millau Wine Olympics

**1986** Brothers graft Pinot Noir vines over to Chardonnay

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. 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 Charlie – 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, Cook’s Flat, 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 is as yet unclear. Simply 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. **D**

**1998** Brothers begin replanting the vineyard on phylloxera-resistant rootstock

**2000** Estate Cabernet includes Merlot and Cabernet Franc for the first time

**2007** First vintage of Cook’s Flat Reserve

**2013** Sam Smith, Stuart’s son, joins winery full-time

**2018** Winery produces first rosé

## A taste of Smith-Madrone: McCoy’s view

### ① Smith-Madrone, Riesling, Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley 2016 91

£37-£40 Roberson, *The Wine Reserve* Smith-Madrone’s dry Riesling has long had a dedicated following and the winery is one of the few producers of the variety left in Napa. It’s Alsatian in style, and this vintage shows a super wet-rock minerality, succulent limey notes, juicy acidity and a round texture. It’s also the first vintage available in hand-waxed magnums, which makes sense because the wines are surprisingly long-lived. **Drink** 2020-2029 **Alcohol** 12.8%

### Smith-Madrone, Chardonnay, Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley 2017 89

N/A UK [www.smithmadrone.com](http://www.smithmadrone.com) This was a rollercoaster vintage in terms of temperature, with oppressive heat on Labor Day weekend in early September (not to mention the horrific October fires, which didn’t damage Smith-Madrone). According to Stu Smith, without watering the vines might not have survived. But this estate Chardonnay is a nice wine in a tough year: it’s round and rich with green hints and lovely acidity. **Drink** 2020-2025 **Alc** 14.2%

### ② Smith-Madrone, Rosé, Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley 2018 90

N/A UK [www.smithmadrone.com](http://www.smithmadrone.com) 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 really stands out. Aromatically, it shows off luscious floral aromas of roses, and intense, succulent red-berry fruit flavours coat your tongue. This is a serious rosé that would go well with food. **Drink** 2020-2022 **Alc** 14.3%

### ③ Smith-Madrone, Cook’s Flat Reserve, Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley 2016 96

N/A UK [www.smithmadrone.com](http://www.smithmadrone.com) This limited-production Cabernet blend is a selection of the best barrels, and the vintage enjoyed 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 über-intense, and the texture is smooth and concentrated. Wow! **Drink** 2021-2040 **Alc** 14.3%

### Smith-Madrone, Cabernet Sauvignon, Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley 2016 94

£50 (2015) Roberson The winery’s estate Cabernet is from mostly dry-farmed vines grown at the top of Spring Mountain, elevation 550m, and in this vintage the sense of place shines through – especially with only 45% new

oak used for barrel ageing. 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. **Drink** 2020-2036 **Alc** 14.3%

**Decanter**  
PREMIUM

For tasting notes of 12 more Smith-Madrone wines back to 1979, see [Decanter.com/Premium](http://Decanter.com/Premium)

