

## Pinot Noir in Washington State? Vintner Charles Smith Sees Potential

The rebellious vintner, known for Syrah and Riesling, has been quietly cultivating a 373-acre Pinot Noir vineyard in northern Columbia Valley



*Charles Smith stands in Golden West vineyard, the Pinot Noir plot he's planted in northern Columbia Valley. (Eric Becker)*

Leave it to vintner Charles Smith to do something out of left field. **Who else but an iconoclast like Smith would plant 373 acres of Pinot Noir in Washington, a state known for Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah?** Smith believes the vineyard, named Golden West, is the largest planting of Pinot in the history of Washington. That's easy to say—according to the USDA, in 2017, when Smith had just started planting, there were only 600 acres of Pinot Noir in the entire state.

**Smith rarely does anything on a small scale. When the vineyard reaches full production, it could produce 120,000 cases a year.** Smith, whose brands include K Vintners, Sixto and Substance, built his winemaking reputation with cutting-edge marketing and winemaking ideas. One goal was to produce serious value wine, which he did with Kung Fu Girl Riesling, harvested from the cool Ancient Lakes region, as well as Velvet Devil Merlot, before selling those and other brands to Constellation for \$120 million in 2016.

That was the same year he started planting Golden West vineyard. Smith said he was inspired by the success of Kung Fu Girl and his Chardonnay brand, Sixto. **If those cool-weather white grapes thrived in Washington, why not Pinot Noir?**

Golden West is within the Royal Slope American Viticultural Area (AVA), located between the Wahluke Slope and Ancient Lakes AVAs in northern Columbia Valley. The first vintage was 2018, but Smith has been reluctant to talk about Golden West before now.

"I didn't want to make anything public until I knew what we had. There were a lot of reasons we could be successful there," he told Wine Spectator. **"But you can't believe your own bullshit. The truth is in the bottle."**

Smith considered the location in detail. **The latitude and summer daytime temperatures are similar to those of France's Burgundy region. The vineyard is at an elevation of 1,600 feet and has a mix of limestone, volcanic and sandy soils.**

The vines are spaced relatively tightly to control vigor, and the vineyard has produced about 3.5 tons an acre on average. He ferments about 30 percent whole clusters, using ambient yeast, and the wine rests on its lees in the barrel, unfiltered or stirred until it's ready to bottle.

**"It's a large-volume wine, but we don't cut corners,"** Smith said. He's making a single bottling from the vineyard for now, but he has already identified certain blocks that could potentially be released as reserve wines. The current release, Golden West Pinot Noir Washington 2019, will retail for \$20, has 13.5 percent alcohol and shows an earthiness found more frequently in Old World Pinots than new.

The value price point was crucial to Smith:

***"I think everybody should have access to good wine no matter how much money they have. This is my legacy project. I want to be known as the guy who brought Pinot to Washington state."***—Charles Smith