

## Oregon Pinot Noir is Renowned. Why Doesn't the Variety Excel in Washington?



**W**ashington State grows more than 100 grape varieties and produces world-class bottlings out of many, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Riesling and Merlot. One grape, however, has consistently eluded the state: Pinot Noir.

It's not for lack of trying. Pinot Noir was first planted in Washington in 1941. Despite that long history, as of 2017, the variety makes up less than 1% of current plantings, and much of the fruit is used for sparkling wine. To date, most attempts to make still Pinot Noir have been more dalliance than full embrace, and the results, at best, more intriguing than illuminating. The state's distinct lack of success with Pinot has been particularly dissonant given Oregon's well-deserved accolades.

One producer, however, is looking to change the current calculus. House of Smith, founded by Charles Smith, is launching an aggressive Washington Pinot Noir project.

"We're pushing all of our chips in on this," says Brennon Leighton, winemaker at House of Smith, which includes the brands K Vintners, SIXTO, Substance and others. "We felt like the potential was there for [Washington] Pinot Noir. We just felt like we had to find the right microclimates, we had to find the right soil types and we had to find the right aspects to produce this wine."

Doing that, however, would not prove easy.

### Growing Pinot Noir in the Desert

The Columbia Valley, where the vast majority of Washington's wine grapes is grown, is an arid and semi-arid desert. Summertime temperatures routinely reach into triple digits. It is not an environment that conjures up images of Pinot Noir.

"Merlot can just stroll through many, many days of 100 degrees and come out the other side shining, but the real high heat, it takes the top off of the fragrance of Pinot Noir," says Caleb Foster, owner and winemaker of Gunpowder Creek.

It's not just eastern Washington's heat. Pinot Noir is notoriously sensitive to sunshine, cloud cover, humidity, nighttime temperatures and other climatic factors.

"It's a challenging variety," says James Mantone of Syncline Winery, which at one point made Pinot Noir. "You have to have all those things lined up."

Then there is the matter of soil. Eastern Washington is dominated by windblown sand and silt, a contrast to Burgundy, the benchmark for world Pinot Noir.

"Our soils are completely different," says Matías Kúsulas, owner and winemaker at Valo and Massalto, which make a limited amount of Pinot Noir. "We don't have limestone [like Burgundy]. We don't have clay."

# A Search for the Perfect Site

Smith and Leighton, however, were undeterred by Washington's modest (at best) track record with Pinot Noir, preferring instead to see the state's overall promise as a growing region. Parts of the Columbia Valley lie between the 46th and 47th parallels, well-aligned with Burgundy. Eastern Washington has a continental climate, as does Burgundy. Soils in some areas also have high levels of caliche, or calcium carbonate, that has similarities to limestone.

In their quest, Smith and Leighton started by trying to find a site that was substantially cooler than most of the Columbia Valley.

"We wanted to find a place that, while most of [eastern] Washington was at 90, 95 [degrees Fahrenheit], this place would be more like 80, 85," Leighton says. They also looked for a physical feature that would assist with cooling, with the Columbia River the obvious candidate. Next would be higher elevation to help with cooler temperatures and to provide large diurnal shifts.

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—Caleb Foster, Gunpowder Creek.

What the winery ultimately found was a new site called Golden West. Located in the Royal Slope appellation, the newly established vineyard sits between 1,550 and 1,615 feet above sea level, higher than most plantings in Washington at present. It overlooks the Columbia River, with a nearby canyon providing airflow.

"I was totally amazed by the land," Leighton says.

## Charting a New Future for Pinot

In 2016, House of Smith contracted to plant 35 acres of Pinot Noir. Today it has an astonishing 373 acres, with more on the way. For perspective, in 2017, the year of the state's last acreage survey, Washington had 506 total acres of Pinot Noir.

While Smith and Leighton hope to eventually produce a reserve level wine, the aim of Golden West is simultaneously more modest and more ambitious: to produce a \$20 Pinot Noir at scale (the winery also makes a rosé). Golden West's first vintage was 2018 at 6,900 cases. Production climbed to 27,000 cases in 2020, with substantial room to grow.

"We're not saying [Washington is] necessarily better than anybody else, but no one can make better wine than us at \$15-\$25 a bottle," Leighton says.

Given Washington's lack of success to date with Pinot Noir, some might consider the project quixotic—a search for the state's vinous white whale. However, while Smith has had a checkered personal reputation, he's had considerable success making and marketing Washington wine.

In 1999, Smith founded K Vintners, going on to produce top-scoring Syrah, Grenache and other varieties. He was

equally adroit making entry level wines. In 2010, he sold the value-focused Magnificent Wine Company and its House Wine brand to Precept Wines. In 2016, he sold Charles Smith Wines and its lineup of grocery store priced offerings to Constellation for an eye-popping \$120 million.

Now, Smith must try to convince the world to buy and care about Washington Pinot Noir.



## A Look Toward Legacy

Diagnosed with throat cancer in recent years, Smith's Golden West project has an eye toward legacy, with a back label that reads "Charles Smith b.1961 – ." Still, with Smith's reputation, both good and bad, seemingly cemented, why even bother chasing after Pinot Noir, let alone Washington Pinot Noir?

"There's been talk of, 'Why don't you just go to Burgundy? Why don't you just go to Oregon? Why don't we just go to California?' Because we're from Washington, and we believe in it," Leighton says. "We think that the next evolution is to make Pinot here."

Though it is a difficult task, the early vintages of Golden West both from bottle and barrel show promise. True success, however, will require not just producing noteworthy wines. It will also demand defining what exactly Washington Pinot Noir is to the market—no easy feat for a state whose multitude of varieties already creates identity issues.

The ultimate question, though, is whether the goal is even achievable.

While widely planted, Pinot Noir has only reached lofty heights in an extremely limited number of places on the planet. Does Washington, in the right locations, with the right farming and with the right winemaking, truly have the potential to become one of them?

"I always refer back to what the textures, aromas and flavors are of Burgundy," says Lindsey-Thorsen. "That's my reference point. Oregon I think gets pretty close, California in a few special places. Whether Washington can do that, I don't know."

# HOUSE of SMITH