

"THE OSTENTATIOUS PARLAY"

by Mark Gudgel

"When I made this wine, I needed a creative outlet, and a financial outlet. I needed to be independent. I needed to make my own mark, I needed to make my own wine."

I first met Sam Smith at Smith-Madrone, the winery that bears this last name, a few years ago on a trip to the Napa Valley. The winery, naturally, also bears the last name of his father, Stu, and uncle, Charley, who were among the early post-prohibition Napa Valley pioneers, establishing their Spring Mountain winery years before the infamous "Judgment of Paris" that broke the dam and led to a flood of wineries springing up over the past forty years.

Sam is amiable yet stoic, with a handshake like a vice grip and a coozie in his back pocket at all times. His blue jeans and baseball cap accurately suggest an agriculturalist, while his broad shoulders are evidence of a relentless work ethic. Sam has traveled the world as part of his duties at Smith-Madrone, but spends most of his time up on Spring Mountain, tending to grapes, making wine, and showing visitors around. To an outsider like me, it sounds idyllic, but Sam knew it couldn't last forever.

"I was working at a restaurant in Tasmania as a somm, and a couple from Texas were in. I was describing for them what it takes – buying the land, planting the grapes... pick, harvest, wait two years in barrel, bottle it, wait another year..."

The woman's eyes got big, and she said "That sounds like a pretty big bet." Her husband added: "That's like a parlay, a pretty big bet." Then his wife added, in her beautiful Carolina accent, "That's an ostentatious parlay, a *huge* bet."

Years later Sam's wine, Curly St. James, was released with the phrase "The Ostentatious Parlay" written below the name. "For me, it's the ostentatious parlay... it's gonna take a lot for me to

win, but if I do, it's a big win," Sam told me.

One look at a bottle of Curly St. James suggests immediately that it's different from most of the wines that people send for me to review. The bottle's shape is reminiscent of the grand cru Chateau Haut-Brion, while the golden wax that replaces the more traditional foil sets it off from a distance. Up close, the label is a finely detailed work of art. The words "Meraki" "Mudita" "Querencia" "Fernweh" and "Eunoia" appear in faint gold lettering around the edges, each one in a different language, each one meaningful to Sam. He was kind enough to take the time to explain them to a one-language yutz like me.

"Meraki" he began. "That's to do something with all of your heart, all of your love, all of your soul."

"Mudita: that's the opposite of schadenfreude. It's getting pleasure out of other peoples pleasure."

I want people to get pleasure out of this wine. People looking for something different and unique should get pleasure from this wine, and that will bring me pleasure."

"Querencia means your life is your work, and you put all of your life and your soul in your work."



“Fernweh is a homesickness for a place you’ve never been. For me, that means I can’t wait for people to try this wine in eight, ten, thirty years. I have this uncontrollable urge to get somewhere I can’t be, and that’s all I could find in the languages of the world to describe that feeling.”

“Last is Eunoia, which is essentially the rapport between a speaker and his audience. As a winemaker, I have to have a rapport with the people who drink my wine.”

These tiny words, inscribed upon the label, in essence sum up who I know Sam Smith to be. He’s thoughtful. He’s an artist. And he’s passionate about his craft. He desperately wants people to try – and love, this wine. Ultimately, the attention to detail paid to the appearance of the bottle is but a hint at what’s inside. Sam’s first and current vintage, the 2013, is incredible. Equal parts Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, it’s a bold, dark monster, with an elegant streak lurking below the surface. 14.5% ABV, it’s pretty clearly Napa from start to finish – and there’s nothing at all wrong with that.

With my glass resting on the countertop, I took in the bouquet from a good three feet away. The deepest ruby coloration you can imagine, it was beautiful even before it reached my palate. Upon tasting it, bright purple fruits abound, blackberry and currant,



a hint of jammy razz, and the scent of leather that I find almost always leads to structure on the palate. Red fruits and more purple and black ones in the mouth, with undeniable pipe tobacco notes and more of the saddle leather revealed by the nose. The fine yet persistent tannins draw out the finish and linger on the gums. A

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fruit bomb like this needs a lot of acidity and tannins to balance it out, and yet this one indeed hits the mark. This is a beautiful wine. This is an ostentatious parlay. And with a boutique production of only 120 cases, for the lover of great wine, this is an opportunity not to be missed.

While Curly St. James is currently available only online, the entire Smith-Madrone portfolio can be found at **The Winery** right here in Omaha. Sam also told me that he plans to attend **VinNEBRASKA**, which will be held on April 13 to 14 of 2018. Tickets are available at www.vinnebraska.com. While Sam won’t be pouring this wine at the event this year, it’s still worth coming to meet him, and to taste the wines of Smith-Madrone that were the precursor to the soon-to-be-infamous Curly St. James.

