Charles Smith Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 Columbia Valley

6 Nov 2010 by Jancis Robinson

From £9.99 and $15.99

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One of the benefits for British wine drinkers of the increasingly important role played by the UK's biggest wine company in the US is that its wine buyers are considerably more knowledgeable about and interested in American wines than most of their British counterparts. As a result, Laithwaites' range of American wines has improved considerably, and they are currently offering what must be the UK's best-value bottle from Washington state (most of them cost far more than £20 a bottle).

Eastern Washington three hours' drive inland from Seattle has many virtues for wine growing. Its semi-desert conditions offer rain-free summers, which result in particularly healthy grapes. There is, so far, no shortage of irrigation water. Temperatures drop at night, conserving freshness and fruitiness in the grapes. This may be why Washington wines seem to have particularly vivid flavours and brightness of fruit. Or it may be because the generally sandy soils here have kept the phylloxera louse, fatal to European vine roots, at bay so that, most unusually, growers here don't have to graft their European wine-bearing vines on to phylloxera-resistant American rootstocks. The only real viticultural hazard here is the fiendishly cold winters when temperatures can drop so low that varieties such as Merlot and Grenache have difficulty surviving the freeze.

Washington and the hard-wooded Cabernet Sauvignon on the other hand seem a match made in heaven. Some of the finest varietal Cabernets I have tasted have been from the likes of DeLille, Leonetti, Quilceda Creek and Woodward Canyon, the stars of the old guard in Washington state. But Charles Smith (pictured) definitely belongs to the next generation. In fact he is the star of the next generation - a sort of self-styled rabble rouser very much in the long-haired mould of Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat in California's Central Coast. He started his K Vintners label in 2000 (K for 'K Syrah', we are told) but is now bottling an increasing proportion of his wine under his own name (including the likes of The Velvet Devil Merlot, Boom Boom Syrah, Kung Fu Riesling and a rather lovely Château Smith 2006, all imported into the UK by Bibendum Wine and described in my recent collection of American tasting notes). Smith was voted winemaker of the year last year by *Food & Wine* magazine in the US - quite an achievement.

So to find a wine made by Charles Smith that has travelled so far, from a mail-order merchant not famous for cutting its prices, at under £10 is really rather exciting - and all the more so to terroir-fans such as me because 96% of the grapes were grown on the Wahluke Slope, one of the most northerly Washington AVAs (American Viticultural Areaa - the US equivalent of a wine appellation) but one tilted towards the sun to make the most of the state's extremely long summer days. The blend of the wine, I am told with great precision, is 89.2% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7.1% Syrah, 3.6% Merlot, 1% Sangiovese.

I think you can taste the sunshine and ripeness. This is far from a cool-climate wine with just a hint of rhubarb as well as super-ripe black fruit flavours. Yet it is fresher than many California Cabernets thanks to the brightness of Washington fruit. This seems a very fair price for a wine hand crafted by one of the state's brightest stars - who chooses to use the almost ridiculously extensive Columbia Valley AVA rather than the much more limited Wahluke Slope one, presumably to allow himself flexibility. There are still some tannins in evidence but I would drink this over the next year or two.

I'm guessing this is the same wine as the one described as CS Charles Smith Cabernet Sauvignon Columbia Valley on Wine-searcher.com which is widely available in the US.

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