

THE HAPPINESS BUSINESS

BY RHEA MAZE

Two groggy college buddies hop from one train to the next, heading south in the middle of the night, determined to escape Germany's frigid temperatures. As the cars chug along Spain's northeastern coastline, a young Russell Smith gazes out the window, captivated by a Mediterranean sunrise setting a line of clouds ablaze in gold as they pass grove upon grove of orange trees. The air finally begins to warm and the seed of a dream is planted.

Fast-forward 35 years and Smith is waist-deep in wildflowers—inspecting his rows of traditional carignan grapevines as honeybees go about their work all around him. Grateful for the erosion control afforded by the flowers, he pauses to close his eyes and take in the fragrance. “It’s like being in a perfume store next to a saw mill,” he says.

We’re in El Molar, a two-hour drive southwest from Barcelona, where the vineyards Smith acquired in 2012 bask in full sunlight, and an ever-present Mediterranean breeze keeps the temperature just right. The vine varieties that have grown here for hundreds of years are nurtured by pale pink and yellow soil with a flour-like consistency that glitters with quartz pebbles. These factors combine to produce small berries on loose clusters, well-known characteristics of some of the world’s best wine grapes.

“The most important aspect of good winemaking comes down



to the grapes,” Smith says. “You have to start with the basics: the right grape, planted in the right soil, in the right climate. After years of searching, I’ve found that place. Ever since that day on the train over thirty years ago, I knew that someday I would end up here.”

Smith kicked off his wine career back in 1983 when he headed out to California’s Napa Valley to learn the ropes. He honed his craft over the years at several wineries, including Joseph Phelps Vineyards and Flora Springs in California, and Becker Vineyards in Texas. Twenty years passed before he returned to Spain for a second visit, and it took over 10 more years to arrive at the point he is now—with a portfolio of four distinct Spanish blends (a tangy white, a full-bodied red and a crisp rosé) under his

Barcelona Celler label, and a vintage estate-wine labeled Celler D. Russell Smith. Currently, Smith commutes between his two favorite places in the world—Austin and Spain—and spends part of each spring, summer and fall in El Masroig, a tight-knit town of about 400 people that’s just a short drive from the small farming community of El Molar.

Archeologists estimate that grape cultivation first began in Spain between 5,000 and 7,000 years ago. “With a tradition of making wine in this part of Spain dating back a very long time,

“Good wine is a metaphor for a good life. You’re looking for balance and complexity.”
—Russell Smith

you can expect that the people here have it figured out,” Smith says. He solicited help from a local farmer and an oenologist—both native Catalans whose families have lived in the area for centuries. “With a new project like this, it’s important to find people who know the lay of the land,” he says. “Grapes are not the same everywhere; you have to respect tradition and listen to the locals.”

Smith’s fall harvest is separated into both a traditional and a whole-berry fermentation. He also ferments grenache harvested from a nearby organic vineyard. The three types of wine he ends up with are processed as gently as possible in a small, 100-year-old winery outfitted with basic equipment. The batches are aged about 10 months before being blended. “I keep the process as noninterventionist as possible, allowing the grapes to express themselves to their highest potential,” Smith says. This is easy, he notes, given the fact that the climate and soil have already done most of the work. “Good wine is a metaphor for a good life,” he says. “You’re looking for balance and complexity. You don’t want any one characteristic to dominate, and the goal is to allow the natural flavors and aromas of the grape to come through as pure as possible.” Once satisfied, he allows the blends to marry for several months before bottling and shipping them back home to share with Texas.

The finished product is a drinkable, quietly elegant, everyday wine that captures the essence of what Spanish wine connoisseurs have enjoyed for thousands of years, in a way that appeals to modern tastes. “Even though these are old-world wines,” he says, “my goal is to create blends that introduce a bit of classic Spanish quality in a format that’s familiar to the Texas palate.”

As he prepares for a third harvest in Spain, Smith looks forward to the annual challenge of optimizing the grapes Mother Nature has to offer. “A farmer wakes up to a brand new world every morning,” he says. “It’s impossible to anticipate everything, but you have to be optimistic. I love being able to bring something handcrafted and unique into people’s lives. I’m in the happiness business...it’s what I do, and wine is my media.”

Celler D. Russell Smith and Barcelona Celler Spanish wines with a Texas accent are available in fine wine departments throughout Texas. To learn more, visit russellandsusangotospain.blogspot.com

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