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## CADENCE FALLING FOR IT

**Bruce Schoenfeld** tells the remarkable story of Washington State's accidental winemakers Ben Smith and Gaye McNutt, courageously striving to reach the end of their own very particular rainbow

To reach Cadence Winery, you catch the interstate highway in Seattle and head south. Mt Rainier may be visible to your left, an apparition levitating above the cloud line. After several minutes, you exit into an industrial neighborhood and pull up before an unadorned building of corrugated metal. Perhaps you mistake it for an auto repair shop, for it previously served as just that.

The nondescript structure is Cadence's third winery since it began commercial production in 1998. The first, in the middle of Seattle, was a former distribution center for Taco del Mar's Mexican food. Later, Cadence moved to a converted boat warehouse. In 2007, Ben Smith found this facility south of downtown. Each of them could hardly be farther, conceptually, from the traditional construct of a

All photography courtesy of Cadence

picturesque winery—or at least a winery recognizable as a winery—set beside a bucolic vineyard. In part, that's because the grapes used in Cadence's wines are grown hundreds of miles away. It's also an inherent reality of the local real-estate market. "It's difficult to find space in the 4,000-sq-ft [370-sq-m] range along the I-5 corridor," says Smith, 46, who owns and runs Cadence with his wife, Gaye McNutt, and who also makes the wines.

Smith could leave Seattle and build a visitor-friendly facility on the slope of Red Mountain, where most of his grapes grow, but that would take capital he doesn't have. And the charmlessly functional setting is somehow fitting. Smith is a fine enologist, with a knack for blending lots to produce a coherent whole. But more than the vast majority of New World producers, he's determined to render terroir in the bottle—to the point that he has never released a wine with the name of a grape variety on the front label.

Fortunately, Smith is making his wine in Washington. Unlike most wine regions outside Europe, the majority of superior vineyards in the state—what would be called grand cru land in Burgundy—are not monopoles, controlled by a single producer. Instead, growers are in the business of selling grapes to a range of outlets—from corporate-owned behemoths, to nascent wineries that may be only a step above bathtub enologists. From the time that Smith began vinifying grapes in earnest in the mid-1990s, he was able to source fruit from some of the better-known sites in Washington's best appellations. Occasionally the grapes came with the condition that Smith use them to make a wine that would carry a single-vineyard designation. It didn't take long before Smith and McNutt chose to make such single-site wines Cadence's *raison d'être*. "We wanted to do more European-style wines, and we thought that these places had unique qualities," says McNutt.

### "Intensity without weight"

Of course, Bordeaux châteaux have been making Cabernet- and Merlot-based blends from specific vineyards for generations without bothering to inform consumers exactly what they were getting. But the idea that Smith is looking to make a classified growth on the banks of Puget Sound is overly facile. For one thing, Bordeaux itself is commercially available in the United States—thousands and thousands of bottles of it. The market doesn't need imitations. And labeling these wines

as Americanized Bordeaux dismisses the unique profile of Washington fruit. Washington's push and pull of bright, vivid flavors and formidable tannins distances it from the unctuous, high-octane Cabernets and Cabernet blends that characterize Napa Valley, but also from the firm, dusty wines of the Médoc.

What Smith is doing instead is a rather more abstract concept—and one that the vast majority of even Washington's wine drinkers aren't likely to grasp anytime soon. He's taking prototypical Washington fruit and making Old World wines, albeit with rather higher alcohol levels. (I'm reminded of the accents in the movie *Gorky Park*, which weren't Russian so much as vaguely—yet unmistakably—European.) Smith describes his ideal wine as having "intensity without weight." Such a wine might resemble a Bordeaux—but also wines from Beaune, Barbaresco, Bierzo, or Bourgueil, to name just a few European Bs. "If you go to tastings at his house, he's always heavy on Barolo," says Chris Camarda of the Andrew Will winery, who served as a mentor to Smith in the 1990s. "That's where he went when he went to Europe last. He didn't go to Bordeaux; he went to Piedmont. And I think he'd like his wines to be more like those wines."

Today, with ten of Cadence's vintages in the bottle and a growing stack of positive reviews in Smith's portfolio,

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there isn't a vineyard in the state that wouldn't sell its fruit to Smith without any conditions. And after years of struggling to gain the requisite water rights for planting vines on Red Mountain, Smith's and McNutt's own vineyard, Cara Mia, has come on-line. For all that, though, the winery remains caught in a curious place, somewhere between failure and success. At 2,500 cases, it's too small to have broad distribution. It also has yet to develop the kind of

cult following that brings transcendent acclaim. Even its biggest fans, such as Bob Betz MW of Betz Family Vineyards, admit that it faces an uncertain future. "Stylistically, Ben's wines are not wrong for the market, but perhaps [they are wrong] for his market," Betz says. "They're well crafted and well made but also subtle and somewhat elusive. He's making wines that are a reflection of their site, and I think that's entirely admirable. On a global basis, such wines are valued, along the lines of someone like [Josko] Gravner or a small, traditional producer in Chianti Classico. But for the Washington market, are the wines correctly styled? Of that, I'm not so sure."



### From Boeing to Red Mountain

Smith has a long frame and wiry build. His manner is polite, almost courtly. “He’s not a raconteur, not a playboy,” says Peter Dow, the owner and winemaker at two-decade-old Cavatappi Winery, whose import business brings some top European wines into Washington. “His manner is very controlled: left, right, left, right.” Raised in Columbus, Ohio, and educated there at Ohio State, Smith arrived in Seattle in 1986 and went to work for Boeing as a mechanical engineer. At that time, beer was his beverage of choice; in the late 1980s, he started brewing at home. But Western Washington was burgeoning wine-production country then—both Chateau Ste Michelle and Columbia were already ensconced in suburban Woodinville—and Boeing had developed a thriving club of amateur enologists. More than 100 employees were sourcing grapes, a number that eventually came to exceed 250. Smith made wine in his kitchen in 1992—a first attempt that won top awards in two local competitions.

In early 1997, he and McNutt, who was working as a lawyer for Microsoft, purchased a tract of land together on Red Mountain, some 200 miles (320km) east of Seattle. Their future wasn’t yet assured, in terms neither of their own relationship—they weren’t yet engaged, much less married—nor their vinous aspirations, but buying the land ratcheted up their commitment on both accounts. That July, Smith entered four wines into Boeing’s annual employee wine competition: a varietal Cabernet Sauvignon, a varietal Merlot, a Bordeaux blend, and a sweet Riesling. The competition is serious business both at the company and in the local wine community; judges include area winemakers, distributors, and retailers. Not only were all four of Smith’s wines judged the finest in their categories, they were also the four finalists for the Best in Show award. “When all the wines were unveiled, and it all turned out to be Ben’s wine,” McNutt says, “they all looked at him and said, ‘What are you still doing at Boeing?’”

They weren’t the only ones who wondered. “He came into the store one night, and we sat in the back room tasting the wines,” recalls Dan McCarthy, co-owner of McCarthy & Schiering Wine Merchants, which is regarded as Seattle’s most prestigious wine shop. “I strongly encouraged him to get the wines into the marketplace.” McCarthy considered Smith’s efforts not just superior for a novice but as complex as the finest Washington bottlings

he had on his shelves—top commercial efforts from the likes of Woodward Canyon and Leonetti. “Ben seemed able to blend grapes in a way that very few others in the area could do,” McCarthy says.

Smith wasn’t ready to leave his day job. But with McCarthy’s support, he did bottle two single-source blends—one based on Merlot, the other on Cabernet Sauvignon—from the 1998 vintage and attempted to sell them commercially. A devoted cyclist and triathlete and also a music lover, he called his new label Cadence, a word with connotations of consistency and reliability, if not pyrotechnics. Nobody knew the brand, but educated consumers knew the vineyards—Spring Valley and Tapteil. All 600 cases sold out. By the following year, he was sourcing grapes from Ciel du Cheval, which at one time or another has supplied grapes to Quilceda Creek, DeLille, Andrew Will, and most of the rest of Washington’s heavyweight producers. A Washington producer named Bob Andrade had harvested excessive Cabernet Franc and didn’t want it. Smith grabbed it on sight, then blended it with Cabernet Sauvignon and a touch of Merlot from the same source.

Like so many New World wines with a hefty proportion of Cabernet Franc, the 1999 Ciel du Cheval was inspired by Cheval Blanc. Unlike the vast majority of them, it actually resembles Cheval Blanc—at least in mouthfeel and aspects of its flavor profile. Those qualities were evident on release. Full of cherries and spice, limpid and almost cool in the mouth, the wine earned 93 points from *Wine Spectator* and prompted me to head for Seattle to write about the producer for that magazine. Tasted now, it has retained that appealing freshness, and its personality has strengthened as it has moved into middle age. I have no idea how many of the 340 cases of this wine that were produced still exist in the world; Cadence had no track record at the time it was released, and there was no reason for anyone to believe that the wine would last, let alone improve, for a decade. But I’d sure like to try another bottle in five years’ time, and another in ten.

Also in 1999, Smith and McNutt made their first reserve-level wine, labeled simply as Reserve. (In 2001, the proprietary names Camerata and Bel Canto were created for the reserve wines, extending the musical motif. Both are now made purely from Cara Mia fruit.) Only two barrels of the 1999 Reserve were made because Smith wanted the

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primary identification of his winery to be single vineyards. I found the wine as enjoyable as the Ciel du Cheval on release but less interesting. It has aged far more like a typical Washington wine: some cherries, some blackberries, a bit of jam in the mid-palate where I'd prefer freshness. Still, even so-called non-interventionist winemakers have to choose which aspects of a site's terroir to emphasize, and the exercise of blending across vineyards through the years helped Smith better understand how to use his raw materials. "He's become very, very good at figuring out exactly which components add what to a wine," confirms Shayn Bjornholm, a member of the Court of Master Sommeliers and the director of education of the Washington Wine Commission. "He knows what he wants, and he knows how to get there. It's the engineer side of him, I think. He breaks it down into component parts and is able to put it together pretty well."

"We've always done quite a lot of experimenting," Smith agrees. "It's just a part of my background: I did a lot of testing at Boeing. Some of the experiments may amount to something; a lot of them don't. But we always learn."

By then, he'd experimented his way to an oak regimen of one third new barrels, most of them French (a lot of low-end Taransaud, which is all he could afford) and a bit of Oregonian. And he'd come around to identifying a house style for his wines—another Bordeaux construct—that he'd attempt to replicate each vintage with the raw materials at hand. That house style was sorely tested during a series of warm summers that began in 2000. Smith

struggled with balancing adequate flavor development on the one side with ripeness and alcohol levels on the other. He also lost two of his preferred fruit sources, Spring Valley and Klipsun, while continuing to hack his way through the regulatory tangle that would allow him to attain water rights for Cara Mia.

While waiting, Smith and McNutt—who married in 1998—took several European trips. Visiting benchmark producers such as Cheval Blanc and Giacomo Conterno,

Smith had an epiphany. If you want your wines to have certain characteristics at 20 years of age, he realized, you have to work backward to what the wine should taste like when it is young. "Where do the tobacco and all those other evolved flavors in great old Bordeaux come from?" Smith asks. "It's not strawberry jam that evolves into that." By 2003, Smith says, "We were savvy. We were on to the game."

Starting with that vintage, he did all he could to make sure his wines would be more expressive after a decade in the bottle than upon release. "It's a very brave thing to do, and he's one of the very few doing it in Washington,"

says Bjornholm. "He just about stands alone, and I applaud him. I hope tastes come around so that such a thing is as valued as it should be. Because it's hard to sell people on cellaring wines. People used to listen, but they've turned away from that."

It's not surprising that the reviews and scores of the Cadence wines that followed were good but hardly exceptional. And because Smith was a trim, quiet, former



Ben Smith, Gaye McNutt, and their daughter Cara in the Red Mountain vineyard named in her honor

engineer—he'd finally quit Boeing in 2000—with even less flash than his wines, personality wasn't going to be the narrative that would sell his product. "Ben's a bit removed from anything that's involved in popular culture," Camarda says. Bjornholm adds, "In an era of Facebook and Twitter, Ben is still writing snail mail. They're beautiful letters if you bother to open and read them, but not so many people will do that."

Over the past decade, Washington wine has boomed. Its winemakers and winery owners have gained national acclaim, not least for their compelling back stories. "Bob Betz is a Master of Wine," says McNutt, checking the names off on her fingers. "Charles Smith [of K Vintners] is a master of marketing. Christophe [Baron, of Cayuse] is French. The Golitzins [of Quilceda Creek] had been around and had their great success: 100-point wines. And we just felt so normal." Cadence soldiered on amid the hubbub, selling wine at half the price, trying in its own quiet fashion to gain a toehold. "Where was that spark?" Smith asks now. "We just didn't have it. It wasn't there."

### Cara Mia and beyond

In late 2003, Smith and McNutt received word that at last they had been granted water rights for Cara Mia, which is named for their daughter Cara, born in 2001. They then drilled wells the following February and planted in July. By then, McNutt had left Microsoft and cashed in her stock options. That didn't mean they were rich, but they had a safety net. They'd also created a second label, Coda, which enabled them to sell more wine and raise the level of their vineyard designates with a strict selection of fruit. And beginning with 2004, they enjoyed a string of cooler vintages that played to their strength. "We were back into our style," Smith says. "By then, we'd changed a little bit of the way we were making the wine. We'd come to terms with the idea that we're probably going to pick a little earlier than some other people. We'd moved up the totem pole at Taransaud, so we were getting better barrels. We'd raised our prices from about \$35 a bottle to \$45 or \$55. And then, beginning in 2006, we started getting our own fruit."

Those 2006s—including two layered, perfumed Cara Mia designates, the first releases from the new vineyard—are on the market now. From their 1917 Craftsman bungalow in Seattle, Smith and McNutt can look back at the transition they've made from corporate lawyer and engineer to winemakers and winery owners and deem it

nearly complete. "This could have been our year," McNutt says. "The wines have been well received. If the stock market hadn't crashed, things might look a little better right now."

Buying a bottle of Cadence is as simple as contacting the winery and placing an order, or walking into a wine shop in Washington or one of the nine other states—from New York to California—in which they're distributed. (They also send a small allocation to Japan.) "People want what they can't have," says McNutt, "but that doesn't apply to us." Every now and then, though, something quotidian turns out to be sublime. At lunch on Seattle's Capitol Hill recently, Smith, McNutt, and I shared a bottle of 2001 Bel Canto. Equal parts Cabernet Franc and Merlot, with a touch of Petit Verdot, it showed a wall of tannins behind the first pass of vibrant fruit. I recognized the telltale brightness of Washington and the Bing cherry and red raspberry flavors that harmonized well with my sandwich

of pulled pork. But there was also something more austere about the wine that would have brought me straight to the Right Bank if I hadn't known better: some tobacco, some licorice, some dust. One note in particular kept me musing about the wine even when I was on the plane heading home. It was fruit—something between a plum and maybe a mulberry. I'd never encountered it in a Washington wine before, but it was clearly familiar, almost obvious,

yet somehow just beyond my reach. I was staring out of the window at Mt Rainier when it hit me. It tasted like Cheval Blanc.

That Cadence's wines haven't yet crossed the divide into that rarified sphere of mailing lists and waiting lists, of breathless reviews, and of exultant postings on wine bulletin boards may reveal more about the way Americans assess what we drink than it does about any missteps the winery has made. "Ben's wines will, in his lifetime, become well known and famous," Dow insists. "But I fear it's going to take him forever to get there."

Or perhaps Cadence deserves, after all, to be exactly where it is today: a US equivalent of, say, a respected Bordeaux third growth such as Château Kirwan or Cantenac-Brown, doing fine but not making headlines, selling most of its production but sometimes straining to do it, catering to a small but devoted following. If only our wine-drinking public properly valued such a status, that wouldn't be a bad place to be. ■

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