



Couple Kickstarts All-American Wine Story

Smith Story Wine Cellars, 2016 Helluva Vineyard Pinot Noir

Amidst any number of app, animation or product projects, pitches for documentary production funding, or calls for support in self-publishing, one enterprising couple found a loyal new base of friends, investors and future customers on **Kickstarter** and built a brand known by many as the "All-American Wine Story."



Smith Story Wine Cellars, founded by **Alison Smith-Story** and **Eric Story**, was one of the first new wineries to be crowdfunded in 2014. Through Kickstarter, they were able to raise more than \$26,000 in just 30 days and begin purchasing grapes, equipment and collateral to start their own wine brand.

Between the two, they have 40 years of experience helping others in the wine industry: He as a buyer for **K&L Wine Merchants** and she as the creator of a sales and marketing agency that helped

other owners build brand equity. Both had opportunities to travel to renowned winemaking regions across the globe, soaking up knowledge with every vineyard and every cellar they visited. In 2003, while helping plant a new vineyard in the Anderson Valley with his colleagues, Story decided it was time to take a sabbatical and went to Germany to work a harvest, now making the wines he was previously tasked with purchasing for the Bay Area retailer.

The two eloped in 2013 and industry friends, knowing the couple's passion and understanding for wine, suggested they start their own winery. "We were told, 'You've been making millions of dollars for others over the years. You've got this,'" said Smith-Story. "We knew what it took: how to put it together, how to sell it, how to make it. We didn't have \$5 million in start-up."

They turned to Kickstarter. Instead of asking for a large sum, they used the crowdfunding platform as a marketing opportunity, creating a campaign to let backers know that this was a farmers-first operation—not a couple buying bulk wine and slapping a cute label on the front—begun by a husband and wife set on creating the best wines they could. "Everything about our label is personal. Our story is personal, how people help us is personal, our relationship with our growers, cellar crews, sales teams and more is personal," Smith-Story said.

Smith-Story has remained transparent, keeping those initial backers—and anyone interested—up-to-date on just how that money was used. Through "The Chapters" section of the website, she keeps them apprised of all that happens behind the scenes.

In 2018, they celebrated their fifth harvest. In five years, the brand grew from zero to 4,000 cases, mostly sold direct and all powered by storytelling and consumer reviews.

Those 4,000 cases consist of some of the best grapes the Anderson Valley and Sonoma County offer, she said, sourced from vineyards that inspired their Old World focus. The Helluva Vineyard is a standout for the two. "Helluva Pinot Noir brings it back to our heart, the Anderson Valley," she said. "I've loved the '14 and the '15 but the '16 is just a doll. It's such a gorgeous, energetic wine," she said, and *Wine Business Monthly* agreed, choosing the 2016 Helluva Vineyard Pinot Noir over some other stunning wines for its Hot Brands list.

The wine is made at **Grand Cru Custom Crush** in Windsor, where the couple brought on **Katy Wilson** as a consulting winemaker. "We knew enough about winemaking to know we needed someone to check our work," said Smith-Story. Story leads the winemaking side, manages the vineyard relationships and crafts wines that are reminiscent of his time spent in Europe, though distinctly Anderson Valley and Sonoma County.

"It's an Old World style California wine. A lot of times the sommelier trade focuses on the brilliance of Europe," she said. "It's not lost on us that California is more of a geological wonderland, with diverse terroir, micro-climates, elevations and so much land in general to make good wine from."

Smith Story Wine Cellars sources from approximately 14 sustainably farmed vineyards across Mendocino and Sonoma counties, some of them organic, but Anderson Valley holds a special place in her heart. She calls it a wine collector's and wine lover's valley, something she doesn't see changing. It's a gorgeous tucked-away location, 30 minutes from the Mendocino Coast that has managed to keep its private and intimate feeling—it's not a place for mega-winery party buses.

Up next for the All American Wine Story: they're considering building up their hospitality presence with a purchase of land and the construction of a modern tasting room with guest house/lodge. Smith Story recently hired its first full-time employees: a national sales director, to help tell their stories through wholesale partners and bring Smith Story wines to a broader audience, as well as a director of hospitality to elevate their presence in Sonoma County with winery tours and tastings at the winery in Windsor.

The Storys have also received equity funding from a female private investment group. They connected to Smith Story via each other's **Instagram** profiles as well as the couple's dog, **Lord Sandwich**. The goldendoodle winery dog became an incredible force for the brand, with more than 65,000 followers on the social media platform, encouraging visitors from around the world to journey to the Smith Story tasting room. He even has his own charity, Socks for Sandwich: for every bottle of Lord Sandwich wine sold, a new pair of socks is given to a human in need.

The next chapter of Smith Story Wine Cellars looks bright. **WBM**