

# Wine's Most Inspiring People: Ali Smith Story —Owner, Smith Story Wine Cellars

By **Stacy Briscoe** - January 3, 2022

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*"There is no point at which you can say, 'Well I'm successful now, I may as well take a nap.'" —Carrie Fischer*

Words that Ali Smith Story keeps in her pocket, lives her life and runs her wine business by. Because since the time that she and husband and business partner, Eric Story, launched Sonoma-based [Smith Story Wine Cellars](#) in 2014, neither of them has stopped for a breath—let alone, a nap.

For those unfamiliar with *her* name, perhaps a more familiar name will be [Lord Sandwich](#)—the Smith Story doodle-dog, Instagram-influencer, and the couple's sole employee. But Sandwich is not our Most Inspiring 'Person' this year. (Maybe next—the pooch *does* have [his own wine label](#), and runs the charitable [Socks for Sandwich](#).)

For those who *are* familiar with Ali Smith Story, Smith Story Wine Cellars, and Sandwich, it's probably because of Ali's undeniable dedication to engagement with her customers through both her professional and personal [social media accounts](#)—something that has been the cornerstone of her wine business from the very start.



*Ali and Sandwich Smith Story*

The Smith Story Wine Cellars' story (pun *always* intended) began with a Kickstarter campaign asking for a modest \$25K. "We should have asked for the five-mill," jokes Ali. But the campaign allotted them enough to begin their winemaking careers—as well as something much greater: "It allowed us to tell our story from the very beginning the way we're *still* telling it," she says.

Creating and maintaining an online presence and providing online retail was of the utmost important in the early days of Smith Story, as the boutique brand (today producing anywhere between 3,000 and 6,000 cases annually) had no brick-and-mortar shop until Spring of 2017.

According to Ali everyone that knew her and Eric expected their new wine venture to dive head first in to wholesale and distribution, as that is where both their professional backgrounds are rooted. "But what people don't realize is that when I was running Texicali Wine Company in Texas—sure, I managed five distributors at a time, and three-million dollars' worth of purchase orders—however, I was also at the consumer events, creating those consumer events, in the stores doing tastings," Ali says of her 10-year stint owning a Texas-based wine sales and marketing company.

She also points to her past as a wine buyer for [K&L Wine Merchant](#), an experience that solidified in her mind just how important the online DtC wine sector is. "We understood the power of the internet

before a lot of other people. K&L had one of the first proprietary online wine shops. We saw how effective that was," she says. "So, we've been focused from the get-go on letting our customers order wines any day of the week."

With that focus, Ali estimates that in the short [eight years of her winery's life](#), she's packed and shipped over 15,000 DtC orders since their first release in March of 2015.



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That original Kickstarter campaign also allowed Ali and Eric to set their company's ethical tone: "Family Farmer's First." "That's important to us, to farm and work with families in this business," says

Ali, commenting that this has been one of their biggest challenges in recent years because of “all the vineyard grabs.” “We’re not opposed to working with vineyards that are owned by big companies, but we prefer to work with families, supporting local and small.”

“For the two of us, what goes in the bottle is important. And it really does start in the vineyard,” she continues, acknowledging the cliché line. “Organic farming, sustainability is important, regenerative agriculture is super important. All of our farmers are going through those (certifications) if they haven’t already.”



*Pegasus Vineyards, where the Smith Storys have sourced their Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon since 2014. “Sustainable and organic farming is so dear to us!” says Ali.*

So, creating a grass-roots, consumer-focused wine brand came naturally for the couple. To this day, Ali and her husband work alongside their vineyard sources, pour their wines at wine festivals, create their own marketing campaigns, and [write their own blog posts and newsletters](#).

“There’s not a day we don’t have customers say, ‘oh we love to get your emails.’ And, yes, we do answer questions and respond to comments on social media. It’s important to be present for our customers,” she says, adding, “It’s never felt like a sales job. It’s just creating and never giving up.”



*Smith Story club members (Storytellers) receive hand-written notes and little gifts with their shipments.*

In 2020, when pandemic-induced lockdowns threw the industry for a whirl, the Storys were able to lean into their online presence and personal touches, conducting business *almost* as usual. Ali herself made “local” deliveries—as far away as San Jose—and [spoke candidly to her consumers](#) about the trials of owning and running a small wine business. “I had more fun writing last year than ever because I was a little more creative. I was writing less about wine and more about the situation,” she says.

And in 2021, when Ali was diagnosed with breast cancer—that didn’t stop her either.

If there’s one quality Ali holds close to her heart, it’s that of authenticity. So, just as she’s always done, Ali’s continues to catalogue and [share her journey](#) with her followers, utilizing her social media channels and the Smith Story website. “I certainly don’t want this to be the badge of how people know Ali Story or Smith Story Wine Cellars,” she comments. “But it is part of our story.”

In the span of one year, Ali has had four surgeries, 20 weeks of chemo, and so many hours spent on medical attention, she can’t even count, just calling it all a “time suck.” “But it could be worse ... I’ve told myself thriving and surviving. My mental game is the only thing I can control,” she says. “2020 was high anxiety, but it went fast; 2021 was ten times worse, but it went fast. As horrible as it’s been, it’s gone fast.”

So it is that the pandemic and cancer are but footnotes to the story. Smith Story Wine Cellars continues to thrive and survive. 2021 also brought the purchase and opening of their [new tasting room in Healdsburg](#). The [Bacchus Landing](#) storefront is a more central location than their previous place in Philo, more commutable to Ali’s medical team as well as their Sonoma-based custom crush facility, and large enough for the Storys to host events. Ali’s calling it #NextLevelStory.

“Eric and I are constantly asking ourselves, ‘How are we different?’ It’s our personal touch,” Ali says. “To create a place of comfort you can visit that provides a sense of luxury, but also whimsy—in person and online—that’s us. What makes us different all the time is the personality behind the brand, that rawness. We’re far from perfect and far from lovely all the time, but we put it out there.”

—Stacy Briscoe



*Smith Story Wine Cellars new tasting room in Healdsburg, California*

**About Wine's Most Inspiring People:** Each year, Wine Industry Advisor chooses 10 individuals within the wine industry who showcase leadership, innovation, and inspiration. For the first time in 2021, WIA opened up the submission process to the industry at large. With over 100 nominees, the

editorial team selected the top 10 individuals who they felt has truly positively impacted the US wine culture over the past year. [Read more here.](#)



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