

Anne Moller-Racke uses experience to hit the bull's eye

Donum Estate President has deep roots in Carneros soil

Anne Moller-Racke may not look like someone who has spent the last 25 years working the vineyard. In fact she carries herself with a gracefulness that makes it appear as if she's never worked a day in her life. She could be royalty. But Anne's boots are dirty, and her roots are deep in the soil, particularly when it comes to pinot noir from Carneros.

Anne was 19 years old in 1981 when she came to the United States from her native Germany. She was traveling with her then-husband Marcus, and they discovered Buena Vista Winery. Marcus purchased it. Anne recalls working in the tasting room: "The idea when we came here in '81 was to learn English, be here for a year and go back. Because of a connection, we ended up at Buena Vista. I worked there for a year, and I was the best gewürztraminer salesman in the tasting room – because I could pronounce it!"

It wasn't long until Anne discovered that her talent was in the vineyard, and she moved from hospitality and the tasting room to production. Within a short period of time, she was overseeing all of Buena Vista's 700 acres of Carneros grapes.



"Coming to the U.S., I didn't understand the wine industry at the time. Everything was so large. Where I come from in Germany, 700 acres is enormous. I was lucky coming into it at the right time. I didn't know it, but I was in the midst of it, and I feel fortunate that way," says Anne. "I love growing and science. The vineyard is part science and part gut feeling."

After taking the reins of Buena Vista's immense vineyards, Anne grew the acreage to over 900 acres. Still today, Buena Vista has by far the largest Carneros vineyard holdings.

Then, in 2001, Buena Vista was sold to Allied Domecq, a conglomerate whose portfolio includes several wineries and distilled spirits producers. In the reshuffle, Anne Moller-Racke found herself leaving the Buena Vista fold to head up a new project called The Donum Estate. It secured some of the prime vineyards that Anne had been overseeing, along with the Robert Stemmler brand, which was also part of the Buena Vista portfolio.

Both The Donum Estate and Robert Stemmler are all about pinot noir and so is Anne. The facility is located on Ramal Road, and with the exception of one Russian River vineyard that Stemmler sources from, the rest is Carneros. Stemmler produces 10,000 cases annually, some chardonnay and mostly pinot noir. Donum makes only several hundred cases of pinot noir.

Moller-Racke tells me that the Donum project really started in the mid-1990s and she feels very fortunate to be able to continue it after the Buena Vista sale. She still works with many of the same people she worked with at Buena Vista and is pleased that she actually gets to see the grapes through the whole cycle.

"I've been walking these same vineyards for 25 years," says Moller-Racke. "It's the only way to really get a feel for the way things are growing. Now (with Donum), I can pick-and-choose the best grapes. I'm fortunate that I don't have to bring in 10,000 tons of grapes anymore."

Moller-Racke says that things are a little quiet in the winter. But come spring, she'll be in the vineyards almost every day.

"I know these vineyards pretty well. We have a lot of technology now, and with my experience, I can begin to read a particular vintage a little earlier. We try to write a description of the wine we want to make, and do what we can in the vineyard to try and get there. Every year is a challenge, and we're constantly circling the bull's eye."

I asked Anne about something that's been puzzling me for some time. It seems that pinot noir is cyclical, and Carneros was known as "the" place for pinot noir back in the '80s. Then, Russian River had a turn in the spotlight, and now Santa Lucia Highlands is the media darling. She was optimistic about Carneros and about the future.

"You have to realize that when Carneros was planted, it was the sparkling houses that brought most of the material. I think there are a lot of new things happening in Carneros. For one the CWA (Carneros Wine Alliance – formerly the Carneros Quality Alliance) has a lot of new life. We're constantly learning, making things better."

Moller-Racke illustrated the Donum Estate wines through an interesting tale of clones. Early vintages were a blend of Martini and Roederer (a clone unique to Donum) while the later vintages are all Roederer.

"Just when we think we know what a wine is going to do, it does something else. We thought that the Martini clone would add bouquet to the '02, but the wine didn't call for it."

Regardless of which clones were used on a particular vintage, both the Donum and Stemmler pinots are in a league of their own, definitely among the best-of-the-best from Carneros.

When she's not out in the vineyard, Anne is a mom, and enjoys doing mom things. She has a grown daughter who is 25, and she "very consciously" decided to have another child eight years ago.

"Right now, it's basketball games and horses. It keeps me pretty busy. Kids connect you to real life. It's all about growing. I have this world and then I have an adult life. I went to the World of Pinot (a wine festival) where I met a lot of interesting people and did esoteric grown-up stuff."

Anne enjoys collecting art. It was a real treat to tour her house and see the interesting pieces she's collected. Many of her pieces are done by local artists, and most are somewhat modern. Her home is airy and comfortable as is speaking with Anne.

In her backyard, she proudly showed me 250 rose bushes, another of her hobbies. Also in her back yard is 9 acres of pinot noir. From these vineyards, she produced Blue Farm, a delightful pinot noir that is only available at Café LaHaye. Try a bottle next time you are there.

Back in the house her gray parrot, Pearl, keeps a close eye on stuff and reminds Anne to "Hurry up." I was really impressed by The Donum Estate and the Robert Stemmler wines. I was even more impressed by Anne Moller-Racke, her kind demeanor, and her approachability. Maybe she is from royalty!

2002 Robert Stemmler Chardonnay, Carneros "Three Clone"

From the nose, you can tell this is going to be a rich one. Loads of peach and pineapple aromas greet you, and similar flavors continue through the wine. There is also some nice caramel happening here, and just a hint of grapefruit on the finish. It's a big wine, and its ready to drink. \$29

2002 Robert Stemmler Pinot Noir, Carneros

This classic Carneros pinot noir has typical flavors of black cherry and spice, but what sets this wine apart from other Carneros pinots is the rich, round mouthfeel. Hints of lavender and earthiness add style points to the finish. \$29

2002 Robert Stemmler Pinot Noir, Carneros, "Ferguson Block"

This wine is unique in that it utilizes 100 percent Martini clone. And it's obvious from the first smell! This is one of the most aromatic pinots I've come across in some time! Scents of fresh flowers are followed by meaty flavors, red fruit and spice with layer after layer of unique elements. There is a lot going on in this medium-bodied wine. \$39

2002 Robert Stemmler Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley "Nugent Vineyard"

Classic Russian River-style wine with lots of round cherry, cola and pinot-sweetness on the finish. Not as much structure as the Carneros pinots, but it makes up for it with forward fruit and nice spice notes on the finish. \$29

2001 Donum Estate Pinot Noir, Carneros

Like the Ferguson Block Stemmler, this one employs a healthy dollop of Martini clone, which gives it a memorable nose. This wine starts off on the delicate side, but explodes in the mid-palate with flavors of black cherry and cedar. It is nicely framed with acidity and potpourri spice, and it has an amazingly long finish. Worth every bit of the price. \$60

2002 Donum Estate Pinot Noir, Carneros

This wine was made exclusively from Roederer clone grapes, which are unique to Donum. They evidently found the clone in upstate New York. Though not as aromatic, this wine shows gorgeous red raspberry, and the rich mouthfeel really gets your attention. There is a sweet milk chocolate character that lingers on the finish. \$60

2003 Donum Estate Pinot Noir, Carneros

This is the current release of Donum Estate wine, and it has uniquely different character. Aromas of earth and mushroom give way to flavors of plum, black fruit and tobacco. This wine really makes its point at the mid-palate, followed by tart cherry pie on the finish. \$60



C O L U M N I S T Bradley Gray

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