

# Donum Estate doing it right in Carneros

After 30 years in Carneros vineyards, Anna Moller-Racke feels she finally has true perspective on wine growing



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG/ PD

Anna Moller-Racke has been growing pinot noir and chardonnay grapes in the Carneros for nearly 30 years, initially as vineyard manager with Buena Vista Winery in 1981. Moller-Racke, originally from Germany, presides over Donum, one of the longest standing pinot noir and chardonnay estates in Northern California.

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In 1981 Anna Moller-Racke was new to marriage and new to America, dispatched from Germany to Sonoma with her husband, Marcus Moller-Racke. His family had just bought Buena Vista Carneros Winery in Sonoma, one of the oldest wineries in the state, originally established by Hungarian count Agoston Haraszthy in 1857. Anna was put to work in the tasting room. But before long the vineyards called and she was named vineyard manager in 1983, put in charge of some 540 acres sprawled across a burgeoning appellation called Carneros. She was instrumental in obtaining official appellation status as the region started to show promise as a place for chardonnay and pinot noir.

"I remember the French saying if you have 30 more years you will know what you're doing," Moller-Racke said. "And I thought, well, we know how to make great wines, but there's some truth to that, (about) the vineyards being mature. It's like a baby, to see what it will be as an adult, it takes those 30 years."

During her decade-long tenure at Buena Vista, she grew the vineyards from 540 to 935 acres, the largest in the appellation. Now, close to 30 years after arriving in California, Moller-Racke feels she's narrowing in on the perspective and experience necessary for understanding what her vineyards have been and will become — prime examples of pinot's natural place here. "What she's done is clearly transcended to be a wine grower," said Phil Freese, among the finest viticulturalists working in California today, though he also travels the world growing grapes with his wife, international winemaking consultant Zelma Long. Freese has known Moller-Racke for decades, working alongside her as a consultant and becoming her mentor. "That's about as lofty a compliment as I can give," he added. "She can walk a vineyard and know how to prune it, manage a canopy, but she immediately gets the linkage between what she tastes in the wine and what changes can do in the vineyard. Those vineyards are flying under her power. She's got it."

The Moller-Racke family divested itself of Buena Vista in 2001 and Markus and Anna divorced, though not before agreeing to segue into a more personal project. She launched The Donum Estate, keeping 70 acres of Buena Vista's original vineyards — the Tula Vista Ranch off Ramal Road — along with 20 acres a stone's throw north called the Ferguson Block. This would be Anna's estate, her continuing life's work, her chance to use all that she'd done before in a place she'd come to know intimately well. "You overlay years of experience with the site and the clones and you increase your understanding of what works when and where," she said. "Experience is the ultimate tool." Moller-Racke can outline every detail in a bottle of her wine. Take the 2007 Donum Carneros Estate Grown Pinot Noir, for example: It's largely a Roederer clone selection from one block (the 4-90), blended with small amounts of Roederer from other blocks (the 3-90, 2-90S and 1-90N) and Old Martini clone selections from Ferguson. The Roederer sites tend to be planted where there is substantial calcium in the soil; the Martini clones, planted in 1974, are on St. George rootstock in lighter soils.

The Roederer vines, as Moller-Racke describes them, produce grapes that are "fleshy, beefy, dark, brooding and uniquely suited to fit our site." The Martini grapes, on the other hand, are bright and delicate with pretty cherry notes. The 4-90 block has become such a gem that in 2007 Moller-Racke and her winemaker, Kenneth

Juhasz, decided also to make a Donum Carneros West Slope Estate Grown Pinot Noir, "to let this block have its own voice," she says. Only 150 cases were made. It is an astonishing wine. "Wherever it is grown, pinot noir seems transparent," said Moller-Racke. "While it can be 'built' by blending, it also soars when site and clone combine in a pure, clear expression, a watercolor more than an oil." Moller-Racke is well aware that Carneros is not Burgundy, but thinks the farming practices in France, the concept of estate, of tending to tiny vineyards, producing one's own crus (designated vineyards) and controlling one's own viticulture is one worth emulating — that only with great attention to detail can a producer be truly site specific and develop special nuances. Freese is among those who believe that Moller-Racke is hitting her mark in Carneros.

"Donum today is making the outstanding wine of Carneros, in my mind, and doing it consistently," he said. "The quality of those wines are a reflection of the human effort that goes into them. They are different by design, the style goal designed entirely to the site." Donum's first vintage was the 2001, of which 300 cases were made. In all, the winery still only produces a few hundred cases a year, a testament to the intensely personal nature of the project and the labor it takes to know every last vine. "One end of a row can be an environment totally different from the other end," she noted. "The soil is

the overriding factor. Temperature, water and nutrients are all part of it. Then add plant material, climate, aspect and vineyard management and you have terroir."

Moller-Racke thinks it's interesting to watch the pendulum swing back and forth in California on how best to farm for great wine grapes, recalling that as technology surged in the 1980s, some thought viticulture and winemaking could be computerized, especially irrigation. "Today the pendulum has swung back to walking the vineyard," she added. "The vineyard reveals its condition with nuances."

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