

SAN FRANCISCO | PENINSULA | SILICON VALLEY

# GENTRY



Inside the  
Bidding Action at  
**AUCTION  
NAPA VALLEY**

**GENERATIONS  
OF THE VINE**

*The families behind Trefethen,  
Round Pond, and Covert*

**A VINTNER'S TALE**

*Interview with Donum's  
Anne Moller-Racke*

JUNE 2017  
WWW.GENTRYMAGAZINE.COM  
\$4.99 US 0.69  
  
7 1432 01300 1

# THE GIFT

*President and Winegrower at The Donum Estate in Carneros, Anne Moller-Racke has earned a well-deserved reputation for being one of the finest winegrowers in the Napa–Sonoma region. Gentry catches up with Moller-Racke to discover what drives her.*

Anne Moller-Racke walks through the blocks of heirloom Pinot Noir clones like Calera, Martini, Hanzell, Chalone, Swan, and Roderer that she planted back in 1989 on Donum Ranch and inspects them lovingly—expertly assessing their progress. Like the vines surrounding her, Moller-Racke has grown and learned to thrive on this land.

A native of the charming village of Oberwessel, Germany (in the heart of the bountiful Rhineland), Moller-Racke came to California as a young newlywed. Her husband Markus' family had purchased Buena Vista Winery and sent the couple to California to look after their interests. "I thought it was going to be a great adventure," she recalls. "We envisioned that we might be here for a year, but a year has turned into 30. I don't think I understood just how special it was to be here in the wine business in California at the time. Looking back, it really was the beginning of a food revolution. There were new chefs pushing boundaries and revealing that we didn't all have to look to France for great food—that we could cultivate outstanding food and wine right here in California."

Moller-Racke didn't come to California to put her feet up and enjoy wine-country living. Whether she knew it or not at the time, she would become part of that very food revolution. "In German we have a phrase," she says, *'Einen eigenen handel haben'*—it

means to have one's own trade. I have always believed in that."

She quickly rolled up her sleeves and demonstrated her work ethic. By 1983 she was named vineyard manager at Buena Vista's Carneros Winery (now part of the Donum Estate land she farms to this day). Five years later, she became director of vineyard operations, and by 1997, she assumed the position of vice president of vineyard operations. During that time, she helped establish what is now the Carneros Wine Alliance and brought awards and accolades to Carneros as an American Viticultural Area (AVA). She was instrumental in developing Buena Vista's Carneros Estate, which is now the appellation's largest vineyard, nearly doubling its planted acreage in just under a decade with a focus on viticultural innovation.

She also worked alongside some of the wine world's foremost authorities, including Dr. Phillip Freese, Andre Tchelistcheff, and Dr. Paul Skinner. "Andre came to California from Russia in the 1930s as a winemaker for BV," Anne explains. "He was so full of life, and Phil developed vineyards at Mondavi. He was really key in knitting the close connection of the vineyard and the winemaker. He often called it precision farming and stressed that the vineyard must overlay with fine winemaking." That focus on terroir and its inherent importance in the resulting wine may be considered an Old-World concept, but it is employed with stunning





PHOTO: MARGOT HARTFORD

A photograph of a bottle of Donum wine on a wooden table. The bottle is the central focus, with a yellow label that reads "DONUM 2015 YEAR OF THE RAM CARNEROS CHARDONNAY single vineyard". The cork is wrapped in a brown paper with "DONUM" printed vertically. In the background, several other bottles are visible on the table, and a vineyard with green grapevines and a wooden fence is seen through a window. The lighting is warm and natural, suggesting an indoor setting near a window.

*Few vintners in Carneros are more capable at growing Pinot Noir than Anne Moller-Racke, who has farmed wine grapes in the region for nearly 30 years. Donum wines are routinely outstanding, typically among the highest scoring Pinot Noirs from the region.*

— WINE SPECTATOR









PHOTO: MARYSOT/ISTOCK





Anne Moller-Flacke and her puppy, Red

PHOTO: MARGOT HEATON

*Donum wines have achieved a level of excellence that few wineries attain in California.*

—RUSTY GAFFNEY, PRINCE OF PINOT

New World results by Anne and her team at The Donum Estate.

It is here, in 2001, that Anne embarked on her ambitious Pinot Project. After a divorce from Markus, she carved off just over 70 acres of the original Buena Vista Carneros land and renamed it Donum (Latin for “the gift”).

She holds a glass of ruby elixir and swirls it on the terrace overlooking Donum’s beautiful marshland and vineyards—ducks flying in the distance—and relates, “Pinot Noir, to me, is the most feminine of the wines. It is velvety. It goes with so many foods. Cabernet has so much muscle—it can be overpowering at times. Pinot goes with everything from a fish to lamb, pork to chicken. I believe in the idea of wine as food—it must work together.” But the more she speaks, the more you realize that Anne’s passion for Pinot goes beyond taste. This is a woman who would find no enjoyment in going the easy route. She revels in a challenge. “Pinot is so fickle,” she says. “It’s difficult to grow. It’s difficult to make. I think that’s why I love it.” She based the Donum Pinot Project on the classic Burgundian Grand Cru model. “We strive each year,” Anne notes, “for more profound fruit ex-pression from each block, row, and vine.”

Indeed, she sees the final product in every grape, cluster, and leaf. “I can already see how 2017 is shaping up,” Anne says. “I’m constantly inspecting and asking is the cluster large or small?

Should we do some thinning? Does the cluster have a large concentration? The rains will play a large part in this harvest. All these little berries have their own trajectory. I see a bottle of wine like an orchestra. Each instrument with its own notes can be noise, but together they have music. A vineyard manager must be the conductor.”

When asked what the biggest changes are in the industry over the past three decades, she relates, “Choice for the consumer. Back in the 1980s, a small vineyard was one that produced 100,000 cases a year. Now, because of the Internet, the landscape has changed and vineyards producing only 1,000 – 2,000 cases have a place in the market. There is also greater emphasis on experience. People from around the world want to visit Napa and Sonoma for vacation—they are intrigued by this way of life.” To that end, Anne and her much lauded team at Donum have enriched the experience of visiting their little slice of Carneros paradise with a staggering outdoor art collection featuring sculptures by the likes of Ai Weiwei, Keith Haring, and Richard Hudson. Next up: a new Donum Estate tasting room opening this year.

“People are often surprised that I am still doing the same thing,” notes Anne, “but I see this as an incredible journey. As a winemaker, you are lucky to produce 50 vintages in your lifetime. I want to make every one of them count.” ♦