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AVINTNER’S TALE
Interview with Donum’s Anne Moller-Racke

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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 Oberwesel, 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 Cali-
fornia 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 busi-
ness 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 vine-
yard 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 Fieke, 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 wine-
maker. He often called it precision farming and stressed that the
vineyard must overlay with fine winemaking.” That focus on ter-
roir and its inherent importance in the resulting wine may be con-
sidered an Old-World concept, but it is employed with stunning
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
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 expression 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.”