Carneros came to define California’s aspirations to Burgundian excellence in the 1980s, first with Chardonnay, which propelled the era’s white wine boom, and then Pinot Noir. Next came the surge of sparkling wine. The region’s cooler climate attracted investment from Europe. Champagne houses Moët & Chandon (Domaine Chandon) and Taittinger (Domaine Carneros), which had arrived in the ’70s, were joined by Spain’s Gloria Ferrer and Codorniu (Artesa), making Carneros the hub of California bubbly.

Chardonnay has never wavered in Carneros. It’s still the region’s kingpin, the ever-popular star, with two of the state’s heavyweights, Kendall-Jackson and Rombauer, settling in with big farming operations. Pinot Noir enjoyed success, but vintners decided that the grape better expressed its Burgundian spirit in the cooler reaches of Sonoma’s Russian River Valley, and it’s there that the likes of Williams Selyem, Rochioli, Joseph Swan and Dehlinger set up shop.

Now, however, there’s a Pinot revival in Carneros. Domaine Carneros, with its stately château on the Carneros Highway, is the most visible presence. Having changed with the times, it’s the bridge between sparkling and table wines, adopting the mindset that the region’s future should also embrace Pinot as a still wine.

Compared with the earlier wave, the current Pinot movement is more focused on smaller vineyard areas and individual sites that lend themselves to distinctive wines. Carneros, with its shallow clay soils and ever-present maritime breezes, produces richer, denser versions than those from most of Sonoma.

One property that’s seemingly arisen from nowhere is on pockmarked Ramal Road, a weather-beaten remnant of a bygone era, whose lone facility for decades was Buena Vista, California’s oldest commercial winery. Yet this apparent newcomer is really a holdover. The Donum Estate, which grew out of Buena Vista’s old Tula Vista Vineyard, is the link between then and now. The connector is Donum president Anne Moller-Racette, a German native who moved to California in 1981 and began working with the vineyard two years later, when she joined Buena Vista. She has been working with it ever since—for years as a vineyard manager and director of operations for the winery, and then, with the sale of Buena Vista in 2001, taking ownership of the vineyard herself.

Moller-Racette renamed the vineyard Donum (Latin for “gift”) and replanted it. She considers it her ultimate Pinot project, methodically studying the lay of the rolling hillsides and choosing specific sites that yield the most distinctive wines.

Two bottlings in particular, West Slope and East Slope, rank among the state’s best Pinots, consistently earning 93- to 96-point ratings. Yet Moller-Racette’s entire lineup reflects her passion for the grape; all but four of the 54 Donum Pinots I’ve tasted since the 2001 vintage have crossed the 90-point mark. That includes wines from Donum’s Winside Vineyard in Russian River and its Angel Camp Vineyard in Anderson Valley.

Donum’s current ascent came after a period of financial uncertainty due to the 2008 recession. In 2011, a group of investors led by Allan Warburg bought the property, with an ambitious vision for its future. A wealthy Burgundy lover from Denmark, Warburg resides in Hong Kong, where he co-owns Bestseller Fashion Group China, one of the country’s leading fashion retailers. He is a keen student of wine, mostly French, with a passion for Burgundy and Bordeaux. When I met with him earlier this year, he was tasting a flight of elite Napa Cabs from 2001. Like Moller-Racette, he is also an art lover. Together they are transforming the pastoral, dilapidated dairy farm into a living art exhibit, with more than two dozen sculptures set among Donum’s vines.

With a 10,000-case winery scheduled to take in the 2018 harvest, and a new tasting room opening this summer, Warburg’s investment now stands in the $30 million range. Donum’s presence is transforming Ramal Road’s visual allure as much as its Pinots are changing Carneros wine. It’s rare in the U.S. for one person to have worked with one vineyard for as long as Moller-Racette. The quality of Donum’s Pinots is altering the mindset of the region, bringing renewed vigor to the heartbreak grape.

Senior editor James Laube has been with Wine Spectator since 1981.