THE PRINCESS OF pinot

Anne Moller-Racke’s Donum Estate and her 30-year project in pursuit of a perfect pinot.

STORY: DAVID BOLLING
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Anne Moller-Racke is an old-fashioned farmer. Seriously. Just look at her for a few seconds and then, if you can tear your eyes away, imagine her plodding through the mud of a winter vineyard, picture her pulling leaves from gnarled vines in the hot summer sun, or sifting clods of dirt through her fingers.

OK, she doesn't look anything like a farmer, any more than does, say, Michelle Pfeiffer, with whom she shares a more than passing resemblance. She has a comfortably lovely, lived-in face, warm eyes the color of dark straw and the kind of perfect smile that ad agencies like to put in the pages of Vogue.

She is, let's face it, a very attractive woman. And that fact is notable—and mentioned even at the risk of offending gender-centric sensitivities—only because she inhabits a world occupied most often by men.

But then, “inhabits” is the wrong word. She owns it, in a figurative sense. She built it, in a literal sense, and she runs it. It is, in effect, a tiny kingdom of 147 acres, called Donum Estate, of which she is president, and on which she is determined to produce the perfect pinot noir. And that (nominally) allows us to call her a princess (president sounds too formal), even at the risk of embarrassing her and ourselves, because her relationships with her vines are those of a benevolent monarch, she conducts their growth, measures their maturity and ultimately transforms them into something almost royal and deeply enduring.

So, we've established the princess thing. But clearly, she would never call herself that. She actually calls herself a winegrower—it says so on her business card—because that's what she does. You cannot make wine in the lab, she says, although labs can sometimes be useful. You can't even make wine in the barrel, although it necessarily lives there through a crucial stage of its life.

You have to make wine—great wine—in the vineyard, which makes you a winegrower and requires that you know your vineyard, its soil, its climate, its porosity and propensities, its very personality, if you will, as well as you know the creases and contours of your own hands.

So, she really is, in fact, an old-fashioned farmer, and a female whose woman-ness is not all that sets her apart from a good percentage of the winemaking herd.

One of Moller-Racke’s most notable assets is the luxury of time. She has been working the same swath of land, on the open, exposed, often windswept flank of the Sonoma side of Carneros, for almost 30 years.

She, and those she has worked with and for, has had the prescience to recognize prime habitat for pinot noir, popularly proclaimed the most difficult grape to grow well. And the prominence Carneros now enjoys as one of the world’s premier pinot appellations, is in no small part thanks to her pioneering efforts and her intimate relationship with the land.

Legal ownership of Moller-Racke’s vineyard kingdom has changed hands so often that an organizational chart is necessary to follow it. Suffice it to say that the deed to the ranch has been held by at least five corporate entities, including the ubiquitous Constellation Brands, as well as the German spirits company, A. Racke Group, into which she was married when she arrived from Germany in 1981.

The status of both the marriage and the ownership have since changed, but the current owner, a Danish investment group called Winside, has five partners who all share the wisdom of leaving Moller-Racke free to do her thing, the thing she has been intent on doing for decades. Which means, from one owner to the next, the
one constant at Donum Estates was, and will be, the vineyard manager/winegrower. “I want to make wine that is complete,” she says. “The nose, the perfume, has to make you be intrigued. It has to have a beautiful entry, lovely fruit. It needs something juicy, with a certain palette quality in the middle. The finish is important, it has to have texture, and linger so that you want another sip.”

Moller-Racke’s model for achieving perfection comes straight from the tiny plots of Burgundy, where countless generations of French farmers have passed along knowledge and experience from each vineyard, vintage after vintage, until the soil and the vines and the weather, all the unique qualities of terroir, are as familiar and understood as successive members of the family. “It’s just fantastic,” she says, “when you drive through Burgundy, you see these amazing cellars and you understand the different regions, you see it on labels all the time, but then you put it together in pictures, you see just how small their parcels are. And you realize that they understand their land, they can ask their grandfather how that vintage was, and why, and what’s the best way to do this or do that.”

Walk with Moller-Racke and you quickly discover she belongs in a vineyard, she is practically on speaking terms with the vines. As she walks she touches the clusters, feels the firmness, plucks a berry, tastes the fruit, squeezes the skin. She knows the vines because she chose them, she planted them, watched them grow, tasted their fruit, year after year. She knows how this clone on that rootstock does in that soil on that slope with that much sun. Despite two human daughters, she’s not even-half joking when she says of the vines, “They are my children.”

And like children, each vine is different, each row, each block, unique. And like the good mother that she is, she knows the individual idiosyncrasies, the foibles and faults, the strengths and the charms of each complex combination in the grape-growing equation—knows those things, yes, but is still excited by the thought of a new combination, a clone experiment, a shift in some variable she hasn’t yet tried.

There’s an elegance to the way she moves down the vineyard rows, she seems to possesses a trace of some ineffable grace. Somewhere along the way, you think, she must be spitting out the seeds from the grapes she tastes. But you never see it.

She confesses a propensity for technical minutiae, and she self-identifies as a bit of a “wine geek.” But from her cranial storehouse of what some would consider irrelevant information, she keeps sharing fascinating gems.

On the average cluster of pinot noir, depending on variables like weather, there are approximately 144 berries. She discovered this in the process of making wine-grape tarts. And on an average pinot noir vine, depending again on what the weather’s been like and how much fruit has been deliberately dropped, there will be somewhere between 18 and 30 clusters. Which means that a healthy pinot vine could produce more than 4,300 grapes. Before you can say “wow,” she translates that number into grams, to explain what the baskets weigh that field workers fill and carry to each waiting bin.

And that figure leads her to the explanation of why she decided to subdivide her vineyards into even smaller blocks, for the emotional health of her crews. “I figured that when the blocks are bigger and the rows are longer, it takes much more time to finish a row. Delayed satisfaction. So there is more incentive, it feels better, when you reach the end of the row sooner.”

Would a male vineyard manager take the same care? Is this a uniquely feminine sensibility? “Oh, I don’t know,” says Moller-Racke, curious about the answer herself. “I suppose it could be.”

She manages Donum, she says, collaboratively, without micro-managing, and she blends the constantly evolving use of science with her own intuition. She tells
the story of an employee who was sampling grapes, and somehow the data didn't make sense. “She said to me, ‘Anne, numbers are numbers.’ And I said, ‘A number needs to tell a story; what is the story it is telling?’ Sometimes you get people who are only scientists, and sometimes you get the people who are only storytellers. I like science, but I’m also intuitive. I think you need to really combine both in farming.”

She likens the perfect winemaking balance to the performance of an orchestra. “If an orchestra would play all the instruments differently, and not tuned correctly, it would be noise. If they are together, it becomes music. I think that’s the same in wine.”

Inevitably, when you talk long enough with someone whose whole professional life basically revolves around one grape, you have to ask why.

“The pinot grape, it just has less of everything. If you want to bring out more, you have to work harder for it. It has less tannins, it has less pigments. You really need to think of what to do, and then be precise. It’s the ultimate challenge. It’s almost the white wine of the reds. It’s finicky, and it wants attention to detail. I think it goes with almost any food. It really is so versatile.”

Moller-Racke reveals that originally, as the Donum project began, the intention was to make just one wine. “I could have made 2,500 cases of one pinot. What we quickly learned, though, is that, really, the pieces wanted to be singular. And I loved that. I felt, ‘No, it’s not blending.’ But I felt so proud in the beginning that I had all these different clones. One would give me the fruit, and the other one had the structure and the tannins, and some would give you texture. But then it came to me, it didn’t want to be blended.”

An avid art collector, Moller-Racke sums up the blending point in terms of painting. “Bordeaux you can blend, like an oil painting, you can layer it. But pinot is like a watercolor. If you don’t get it right, you have to start over.”

The very nature of the pinot challenge, she suggests, lends itself to small lots.

“I think what really shines, is when you make so many small pieces. That’s what I love about this project. I can be as esoteric and as crazy and eccentric as I want to be.”

Except, perhaps, in esoteric, oenological terms, there is nothing crazy or eccentric about Anne Moller-Racke. As the tasting described in the following pages reveals, she grows truly spectacular, consistently award-winning wine. It’s so good, most of it sells out in a flash.

And once you get to know her, you discover that one reason the Donum wine is so special is that it’s actually a reflection of her: There’s a spiritual fragment of Anne Moller-Racke in every bottle. And that, given her status as the Princess of Pinot, is a very high standard indeed.
DONUM TASTING

One grape, six wines, all of them different, all of them superb. How do they do that? Join Anne Moller-Racke and Chris Sawyer to find out.

If you spend enough time wandering through Donum’s Carneros vineyards with Anne Moller-Racke, you may begin to dimly understand the distinctions between this clone and that clone, this block on the west slope and that one on the east slope, the watering requirements for this soil versus that soil, and even the cluster characteristics that tell you when the grapes are ready to be released from the vine.

If you’re enough of a grape geek you may even, God forbid, start to understand the value of packing grape leaves into a compression chamber in order to measure leaf water potential. Of course, if you even know about leaf water potential you may have already slid past the geekness event horizon into a terminal vitological black hole.

Alternatively, you could just arrange to taste a whole bunch of really, really good Donum wine, with people who know what they’re talking about. That would, of course, include the Princess of Pinot herself, along with, perhaps, a credible sommelier, such as Sonoma’s own Chris Sawyer, who oversees wine consumption at The Lodge at Sonoma and its esteemed eatery, the Carneros Bistro.

That’s precisely the cast we assembled in a Bistro front room, with six bottles of Donum pinot noir, all estate grown, all from the same harvest season, all bottled the same year and all, as it turned out, remarkably different.

At right are the notes that emerged from the tasting. Words, of course, can’t begin to communicate taste. For that, you’ll have to curl up with a bottle yourself. If you can find one. Most of them are already sold out.
2010 Donum Carneros Estate
95 points, Wine Spectator

Chris: Lively, bright notes, earth tones, cherry, red fruits, I’m thinking food right away. It’s perfect, it’s got some Meyer lemon, some English peas, chocolate.

Anne: This comes from our best blocks, our grand cru. And I over-vintage, I give it an extra six months in barrels, that way they lose their baby fat.

2010 Donum Russian River Reserve
94 points, Wine Spectator

Chris: The first thing I think about is ripeness and the level of sugar. It’s immediately accessible.

Anne: You can dry farm Russian River. It has more fog. On the front of the palette it’s more like milk chocolate. Carneros is more like dark chocolate. The clones are Dijon 67 and 115. It is earthy, dark fruit, real backbone.

2010 Donum Carneros 10th Anniversary

Chris: There’s a softness to this, an integration of spices, a mocha note. Compared to the regular estate, it’s like duck versus dove. I also get dark chocolate and blackberries. I love it.

Anne: It’s a blend of two lots. We did it in 20 percent new oak, just 93 cases.

2010 Donum Russian River
93 points, Wine Spectator

Chris: Really strong differences between the two Russian Rivers. Chocolate right there. Very full body.

Anne: This is all Dijon 667 clone. All these wines hold their age. They have a place in time. You can lay them down for 10 years. The acidity holds the texture, lets the tannins linger, it’s so good you want the next sip.

2010 Donum Carneros West Slope
93 points, Wine Spectator

Chris: It’s so different from the East Slope. It’s still young, it’s got tannin muscle, like a cab, it’s got some pop to it, some pomegranate.

Anne: The west slope doesn’t get sun in the mornings, the East Slope has more variations. This is our Roederer Selection.

The wines

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