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SARAH JESSICA PARKER TALKS WINE

Charting a New Course in Carneros

The Carneros district, in the southern reaches of Napa and Sonoma counties, is one of those places where it is easy to see the vineyard and winemaking revolution that has swept California in the past three or four decades. Rolling hills once populated by grazing dairy cows are now covered with row upon row of grapevines, mostly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. One person who has been instrumental in that transformation started out alone, with a toddler in hand, having come from far away and bringing a love of farming with her.

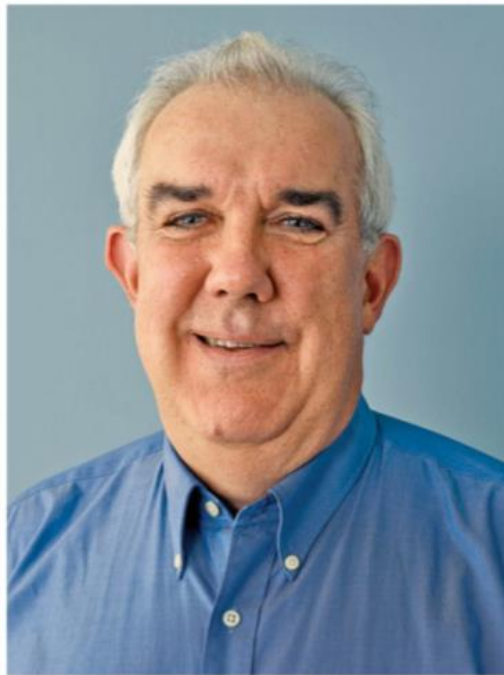
Anne Moller-Racke was 19 in 1981 when she arrived in Sonoma from her native Germany, with year-old daughter Dorothy, to help the Racke group, her then-husband's company, run the historic Buena Vista winery. "I started working in the tasting room, and I was proud that I was best at selling Gewürztraminer—because I could pronounce it," Moller-Racke says with a smile.

Moller-Racke spent 10 years living at the Buena Vista estate as she raised both her daughter and the stature of Carneros. Her influence was two-fold: She was instrumental in the formation of the path-breaking Carneros Quality Alliance, which unified the region's vintners and growers to improve quality; and in 1983 she began working in Buena Vista's vineyards in Carneros.

Although she was short on experience, she had one of the best teachers of the era to guide her; André Tchelistcheff, the storied enologist who helped revive the California wine industry beginning in the 1940s, consulted for Buena Vista at the time. "He was just amazing. The beauty of André was that he was so positive and full of energy and a great teacher," she says.

Her biggest lesson from Tchelistcheff was that the quality of the wine begins in the vineyard. "He wanted to be out there checking the canopies, cluster and shoot positions, and the balancing of the vine," Moller-Racke remembers. Eventually she took courses at U.C., Davis, and earned an MBA at Sonoma State. She also benefited from time with influential winegrowing consultant Phil Freese, who helped her replant hundreds of acres for Buena Vista in Carneros ravaged by phylloxera.

In 2001 the Racke group sold Buena Vista, but retained 200 acres at the heart of its Carneros holdings. It would soon become



Anne Moller-Racke helped Donum become one of the top Pinot houses in Carneros. Now she helms her own label.

Donum Estate, dedicated to Pinot Noir, with Moller-Racke at the helm. In the next decade, under her leadership, Donum became one of the top Pinot houses in Carneros.

Despite that success, the Racke group decided to sell Donum to Danish investors in 2011. They retained Moller-Racke as Donum's president and winegrower. Earlier this year, Donum completed construction of an estate winery, and in June, having worked 18 years at the site, Moller-Racke left to concentrate on her own label, Blue Farm Wines, named for the nearby blue Victorian that is her home. "I feel proud about leaving Donum, because the vineyards are laid out and the winery is complete," she says.

Moller-Racke had purchased the site that would become Blue Farm, which included 10 acres, in 1999. In 2001, she planted 7 acres of grapes and at first was interested only in selling her fruit. But the winemaking bug bit, and in 2013 she founded Blue Farm Wines.

Today, she makes about 1,200 cases from estate and purchased fruit; she may someday produce 2,000 cases. Besides the Carneros estate vineyard, Anne Katherina, she makes bottlings from the Sonoma Valley, Fort Ross–Seaview and Sonoma Coast AVAs. There's also a Russian River Valley Chardonnay from Laceroni Vineyard. The wines are made at Domaine Carneros and overseen by Kevin Juhasz.

Stylistically, the wines are sleek and precise, with a mineral component that stands in contrast to the more opened-textured and creamy style that is the hallmark of the Donum wines. They thus are more Burgundian in nature by emphasizing structure and texture, and join an emerging quality vanguard for California Pinot Noir.

Moller-Racke has been a driving force in Carneros for almost four decades. Dorothy works at Stonehedge winery in Napa and a second daughter, Hannah, born in 1997, is looking to get into the wine industry as well. It's a remarkable legacy and one that should only grow in the years ahead. And for Moller-Racke, it's life's work she never expected but certainly excels at.

"The beauty is, I always came just thinking I'm staying here a year," she says.

Senior editor Kim Marcus has been with Wine Spectator since 1988.