

Technical Spotlight: The Donum Estate

Embracing “The Gift of the Land” in Carneros

Stacy Briscoe

Stacy Briscoe joined *Wine Business Monthly* in 2019. She has been writing about wine professionally since 2015, freelancing for multiple publications including *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Edible Communities* and *Napa Sonoma Magazine*, among others. She also maintains her own website, *BriscoeBites.com*, dedicated to wine reviews and tasting notes. Outside of wine writing, she also contributes as a freelance editor for the independent publisher She Writes Press. Stacy has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English-language literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz.





KEY POINTS

- After nearly 20 years, The Donum Estate opened its first winemaking facility.
- The latest and greatest winemaking equipment is housed in a former dairy barn.
- Pinot Noir clones are planted with vineyard specificity in mind.
- The production team plans for vineyard expansion.

PHOTO: SCOTT SUMMERS



“The winery is more or less in the footprint of where the original milk barn was. I like it. It feels like we ‘recycled’ the site.” – Anne Moller-Racke

SCOTT SUMMERS

“**WHEN I SEE IT** over there, it just puts a smile on my face,” said **Anne Moller-Racke**, president and winegrower of **The Donum Estate** in Sonoma, CA. She’s talking about her brand new, custom-built winery. “The Donum,” which translates from Latin to “the gift of the land,” was established by Moller-Racke as a brand and label back in 2001. Since that time, both the winery and its president have garnered a firm reputation for what Moller-Racke calls the “core” of The Donum Estate—winemaking that utilizes all estate fruit, grown with specificity of the site in mind.

It wasn’t until March of this year that Moller-Racke’s dream of having an estate winemaking facility came true.

Moller-Racke’s connection to the now-117 acres of vines dates back even further, to the early 1980s, when the property was owned by **Buena Vista Carneros Winery**. In 1981 Moller-Racke immigrated from her native Germany with her then-husband, **Marcus Moller-Racke**, whose family had purchased the Buena Vista estate and winery. In 1983 Anne Moller-Racke became the winery’s vineyard manager. Then in 1988, she was named director of vineyard operations and planted the estate’s **Tula Vista Ranch** vineyard. By 1997 Anne Moller-Racke had been promoted to vice president of vineyard operations. During the course of her career at Buena Vista, she became intimately engaged with every crevice of the estate vineyard’s rolling hills, windy climate and adobe clay soils.

When the Moller-Racke family sold Buena Vista in 2001, Anne Moller-Racke was able to maintain ownership of Tula Vista Ranch and renamed it, which launched The Donum Estate.

According to Moller-Racke, her original intention was to build a wine-making facility in 2001. “But then Sept. 11 happened, and it didn’t seem the right time. We had all the plans drawn up,” she said. But in 2002, she decided to put those plans away.

In 2011, The Donum Estate welcomed new owners **Allan and Mei Warburg**. Moller-Racke credits much of the winery’s expansion and recent success to the Hong Kong-based couple. One of their most notable, and certainly the most noticeable, contributions, are the 40 art installations scattered on the Carneros estate property.

With the support of the Warburgs, Moller-Racke was able to bring up the discussion of building out the Sonoma property with both a hospitality and a winemaking facility. Landscaping began in 2015, followed by construction in 2016. The hospitality venue officially opened its doors in 2017 and the winery itself was finally completed in March 2019.

Initially, the winery was supposed to accommodate the 2018 harvest, but electrical complications, weather and construction hiccups prevented that from happening. But Moller-Racke and her current winemaker, **Dan Fishman**, are grateful for the delay. “It would have been too rushed. Now we’ll be able to test-drive the equipment, get a feel for the layout all in time for harvest,” Moller-Racke said. “Even though it’s all brand new—it’s all, well, brand new. There will be a lot of firsts.”



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From afar, the white, linear structure does, in fact, look like an old-fashioned barn. Up close, one can see the building is actually wrapped in a perforated metal screen. The perforations vary in size and are arranged in circular patterns that line the building from roof to base. The design creates an artistic, somewhat hypnotic effect that is very much in concert with the property's modern art installations.

From Dairy Farming to Fermentation

The winery, as well as the acreage around it, maintains an element of nostalgia for the property's days as a dairy farm—which it had been from the turn of the 19th century until the first vineyard plantings in 1985. In fact, the milk barn was utilized as both office space and a temporary tasting room until the new hospitality building was completed in 2017.

Outside the new winery is a petite, but fully developed, vegetable garden managed by a private gardener, who sells the produce to local and San Francisco-based restaurants. Adjacent to the garden, sheep, chickens and even two donkeys graze next to a farmhouse that looks as if it's still standing in the middle of the Wild West. (It actually functions as additional office space for the winery.)

All of this, Moller-Racke said, "informed the dialogue" when planning both the hospitality and winemaking facilities with principal architect **Matt Hollis** of **MH Architects** in San Francisco, who implemented the Carneros farm history into his design. "It [the winery] is more or less in the footprint of where the original milk barn was," Moller-Racke noted. "I like it. It feels like we 'recycled' the site."

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The winemaking facility is permitted for 20,000 cases, with a current capacity of 12,000 cases—the perfect size, Moller-Racke said, for the steady increase in production she and her team have planned. According to

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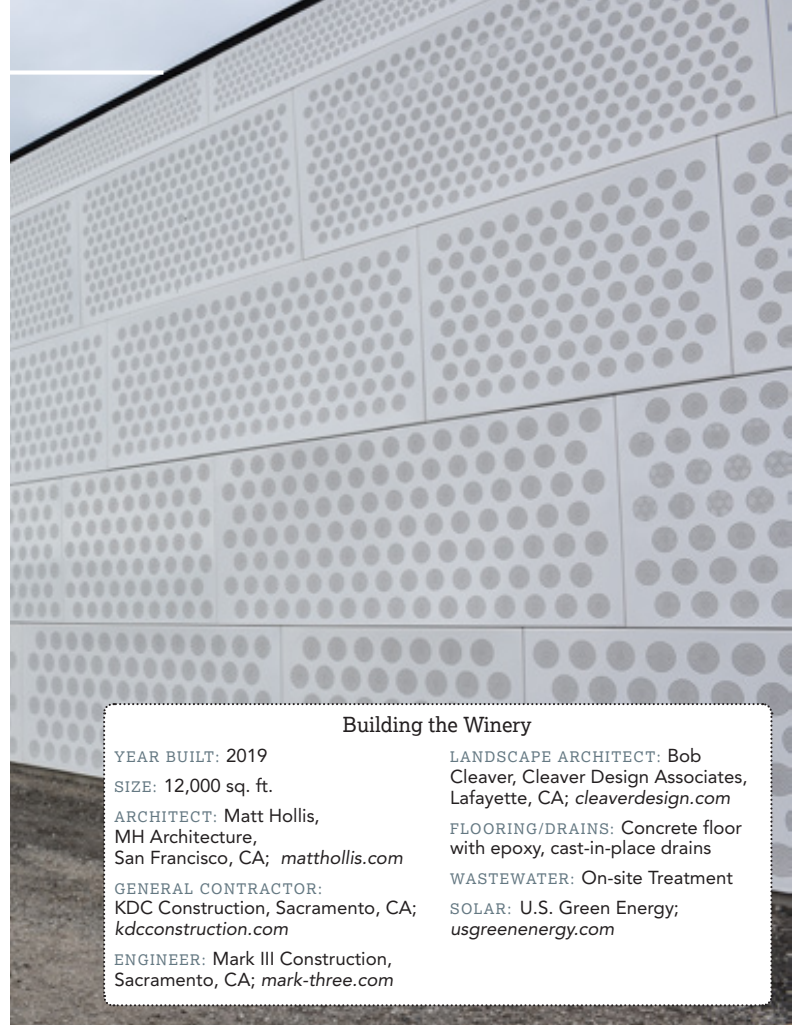
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Building the Winery

YEAR BUILT: 2019

SIZE: 12,000 sq. ft.

ARCHITECT: Matt Hollis,
MH Architecture,
San Francisco, CA; matthollis.com

GENERAL CONTRACTOR:
KDC Construction, Sacramento, CA;
kdccconstruction.com

ENGINEER: Mark III Construction,
Sacramento, CA; mark-three.com

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Bob
Cleaver, Cleaver Design Associates,
Lafayette, CA; cleaverdesign.com

FLOORING/DRAINS: Concrete floor
with epoxy, cast-in-place drains

WASTEWATER: On-site Treatment

SOLAR: U.S. Green Energy;
usgreenenergy.com

Moller-Racke and Fishman, The Donum Estate has produced around 4,000 cases annually for the last three vintages. The two estimate about a 6,000-case production from the 2018 vintage and “a bit more” from 2019 as they continue to expand their planted vineyard acreage.

Fishman describes the winery as having “not a ton of bells and whistles, but everything is clean and modern.” The 12,000-square-foot space houses some of the latest and greatest in winemaking equipment, including a **Bucher Vaslin** Delta Ocyllis destemmer, 27 **La Garde** rectangular stainless steel tanks, custom pneumatic punch-down tools installed over the largest of the tanks and a 40 HL **Diemme** bladder press.

What the new facility doesn't, and won't, have is its own bottling line. Bottling will take place at The Donum Estate, but Moller-Racke and Fishman prefer to use a mobile bottling company. “We only bottle for a week, so it's not worth it to have our own bottling machine,” Fishman said. He acknowledged the argument that in-house bottling provides quality control but added, “A good mobile bottling line—those guys use that equipment every day. I think you get better quality having an expert do it rather than trying to figure it out ourselves every year.”

Fishman said the biggest difference, and the biggest advantage, of finally having the winemaking facility at the Carneros estate is that the majority of grapes will no longer need to be trucked. About 70 percent of The Donum Estate's total production comes from its Carneros vineyard. Since 2004, The Donum Estate has been making its wines at **Punchdown Cellars** in Santa Rosa, CA, an hour's drive from the winery's Carneros estate vineyard. “Now we can pick smaller quantities, and be more selective with the harvest timing for the different lots,” Fishman said.





Managing Vines and Wines with Clonal Specificity

The ability to be more selective and time harvest decisions appropriately is of the utmost importance at The Donum Estate, where each block is dedicated to a specific clonal selection of Pinot Noir or Chardonnay based on aspect, soil and wind direction.

Moller-Racke said that when she first started The Donum Estate, she and her then-winemaker, **Kenneth Juhasz**, saw the project as “just one wine.” They blended the fruit from the vineyard and created an all-estate Pinot Noir. But with the rise of Pinot Noir’s popularity in the early 2000s, Moller-Racke noticed what she called a “split” in Pinot Noir production—the focus became single-vineyard designate wines. “Wineries started buying Pinot Noir from different vineyards, separating them during winemaking and selling them that way,” she said. “But in our case, it’s all Donum. It took us a while to form our vision.”

That vision slowly evolved as Moller-Racke began paying close attention to the individual clones in her vineyard and how they responded to the Carneros topography. Having farmed the property for so long, and

because she experimented with various clonal plantings throughout the site, Moller-Racke is now able to discern not just which clones are best suited to the vineyard location, but in which specific blocks each clone thrives best.

“When we started The Donum Estate, we grafted all the vines over to Pinot Noir,” said Moller-Racke, explaining that while the original vineyard was planted to some Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, it also included Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. “We planted all the clones,” she said, calling it The Donum Estate’s “large-scale clonal experiment.”

“This is a big part that the industry is coming to,” Moller-Racke said. “We know how to farm well, we know which clones we like, but we need to find which clone is best in which place. We were able to come to that conclusion a lot faster this way.”

Today, The Donum Estate’s Carneros vineyard is planted to eight different Pinot Noir clones. Calera is the most planted throughout the vineyard, followed by the self-named Donum Selection (a massal selection of the Roederer clone Moller-Racke received through **Hermann J. Wiemer Nursery** in New York in the early 1990s), 667, Pommard, Swan, Mt. Eden, Martini and 115.

From that first vision of “just one wine,” The Donum Estate’s wine-making program now makes up to 12 different Pinot Noirs, depending on the vintage. “As new vineyards are coming online, we might add a few more bottlings,” Moller-Racke said.

Moller-Racke also farms the winery’s 16-acre **Windside Vineyard** in Sonoma’s Russian River Valley and oversees operations at their long-term leased vineyard, **Angel Camp** in Anderson Valley—both sites are used in The Donum Estate portfolio. Additionally, The Donum Estate recently purchased a 100-acre parcel in Bodega, CA, called **Platt Ranch**, with 20 acres of plantable land. Moller-Racke and her team are in the process of finalizing their licensing and permits for the property and plan to start vineyard development in early 2020, planting 16 acres to Pinot Noir and 3 acres to Chardonnay. The first crop is expected in 2024 or 2025.



Harvest and Winemaking

With that clonal specificity in mind, all lots are kept separate throughout harvest and the winemaking process.

Harvest, which lasts about three weeks, from mid-September through early to mid-October, is all done by hand: “I don’t even like leafing machines,” Moller-Racke said. “For what we do in terms of our price point, we’re very selective and very gentle.” She estimates the Carneros vineyards yield about 3 to 4 pounds of grapes per vine, about 2½ tons per acre.

Grapes are brought into the new winery’s crushpad and placed on what Fishman refers to as a “basic” Diemme belt sorting line. Because the sorting line is on wheels, the harvest team can take advantage of the floor-to-ceiling glass doors on either side of the building, and sorting can take place either inside or outside as needed.

Fishman said he limits sorting to clusters, preferring not to berry-sort Pinot Noir. “I think that with Cab it makes sense because you may have some truly green stuff in there with pyrazines. But for Pinot, some variability in ripeness gives it complexity,” he said, adding that due to the consistency in The Donum Estate’s farming, there’s not a massive difference in ripeness, but the small range does “add something to it.”

Donum Estate Vineyards

LOS CARNEROS APPELLATION: 128 acres
PINOT NOIR 106 acres
CHARDONNAY 22 acres

ESTATE WINDSIDE VINEYARD,
RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY
PINOT NOIR 14 acres
CHARDONNAY 2 acres

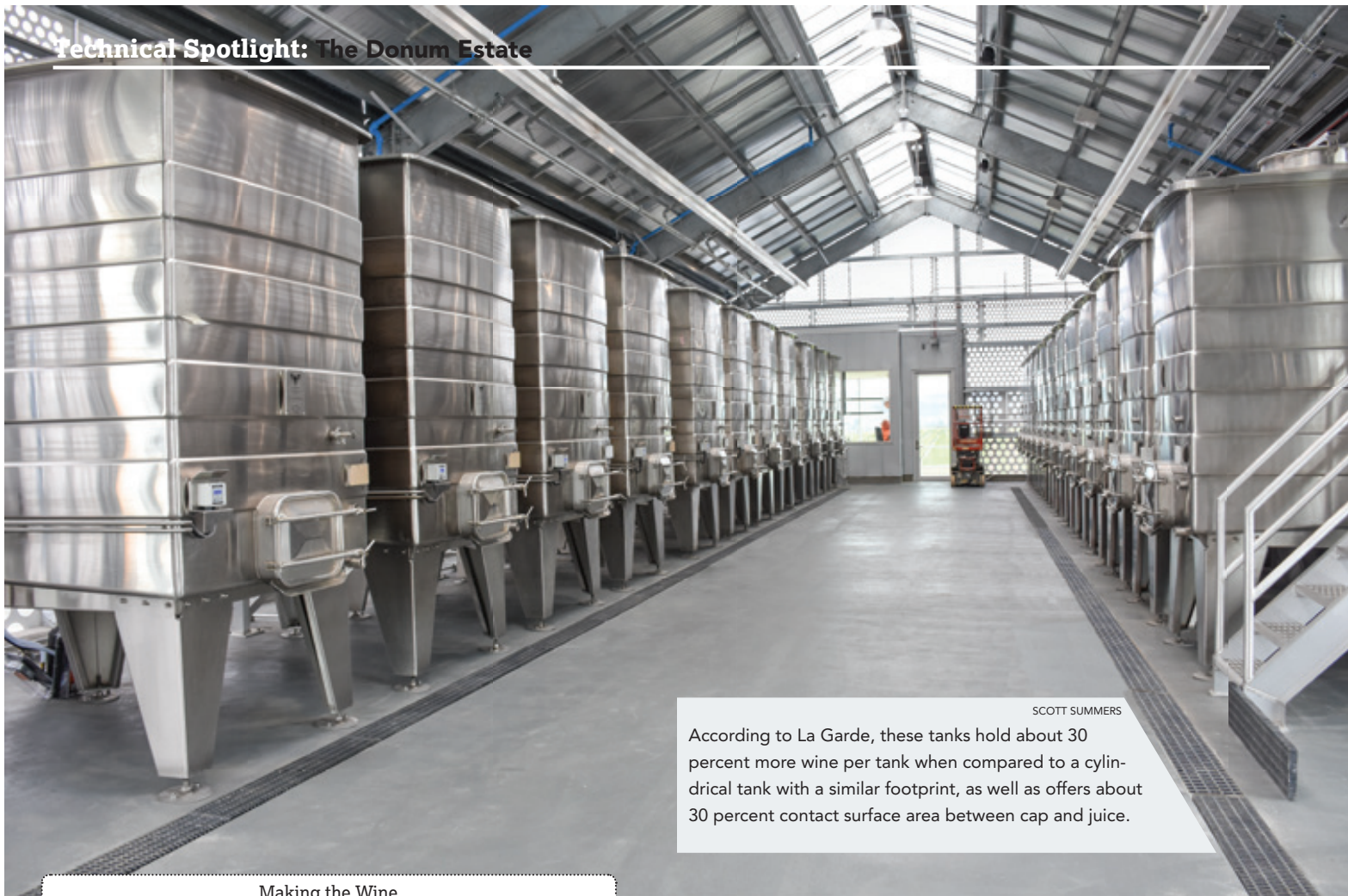
ANGEL CAMP, ANDERSON VALLEY
PINOT NOIR 10 acres



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According to La Garde, these tanks hold about 30 percent more wine per tank when compared to a cylindrical tank with a similar footprint, as well as offers about 30 percent contact surface area between cap and juice.

Making the Wine

DESTEMMER/CRUSHER: Bucher Vaslin Delta Ocyllis, bvnorthamerica.com

PRESS: Diemme bladder press (40HL), diemme-enologia.com

TANKS: La Garde square stainless tanks: 3-, 5- and 7-ton with removable hard tops, lagardeinox.com

PUNCH-DOWN DEVICES: Pneumatic PD tools on rail system, designed by R.S. Randall

PUMPS: 1.5-inch impeller pumps from Burgstahler Machine Works, St. Helena, CA

BARRELS: 100% French Oak, various coopers

WINEMAKING SOFTWARE: InnoVint, innovint.us



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Exterior crushpad

In general, all grapes are destemmed. Fishman estimates about 20 percent of whole clusters are included, and that is limited to smaller lots used for reserved wines.

All grapes go through a three- to seven-day cold soak at about 50° F with once daily pump-overs. The few days on skin, Fishman said, provide the juice with lighter, prettier aromatics. “The weight and body come later,” he said. That weight and body comes as the Pinot Noir goes through an extended fermentation for anywhere between two to four weeks at 90° F.

The extended fermentation, Fishman said, is to help tannins develop during this time, as he does not utilize any pressed juices in his Pinot Noir. “At Donum we have the luxury that we don’t have to use the press wine. When you extend the fermentation...you can get some nice stuff that you could potentially get from pressed juices, but here it’s already integrated into the free run,” he said. The winery does have and use their 40 HL Diemme bladder press, but pressed Pinot Noir is sold off as bulk wine.

The press is also used for The Donum Estate’s Chardonnay; the white grape makes up approximately 17 percent of the acreage in the Pinot-Noir-focused Carneros vineyard. Chardonnay is whole-cluster pressed, chilled overnight and barrel-fermented on the lees. “The main thing that sets us apart is that we don’t do malolactic fermentation for Chardonnay,” Fishman said.

Wine is fermented in one of the winery’s La Garde rectangular stainless steel tanks, which regulates the temperature with glycol jacketing and can be either open or closed-top as needed.

“When you see how much more tonnage you can fit into the square footage, it makes up for it [the cost] with its efficiency,” Fishman said. According to La Garde, these tanks can hold about 30 percent more wine per tank when compared to a cylindrical tank with a similar footprint. The company also touts that the square shape offers about 30 percent contact surface area



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Technical Spotlight: The Donum Estate



DONUM ESTATE

Dan Fishman, winemaker and Anne Moller-Racke, president/winemaker

Donum Estate

OWNERS/PRINCIPALS:

Allan and Mei Warburg, owners
Anne Moller-Racke, president/winemaker
Dan Fishman, winemaker

YEAR FOUNDED: 2001

YEAR BONDED: 2001

DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER SALES: 80%

WINERY CASE PRODUCTION: 6,000

AVERAGE BOTTLE PRICE: \$80 to \$90

between cap and juice. Fishman has talked to colleagues and tasted wines fermented in these tanks, but the 2019 vintage will be the first time he's used them for his own winemaking program.

Above the 5-ton and 7-ton tanks, the winery is equipped with pneumatic punch-down arms, designed by **Chris Randall** of **R.S. Randall and Co.**, in Brisbane, CA. Fermenting Pinot Noir receives about three punchdowns during the peak of fermentation. "These are the days when the sugar is dropping quickly and the fermentation is vigorous and pushing up the cap a great deal" Fishman said, adding that this can occur anywhere between 20° Brix down to 1° to 3° Brix.

Both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are "over-vintaged" at The Donum Estate, aging in 100 percent French oak barrels (60 to 65 percent new oak) for 15 to 16 months before bottling. Fishman calls his barrel selection a "pretty stringent" one. As he and Moller-Racke taste through the wines during the aging process, anything that doesn't make "The Donum cut" is sold off as bulk wine, along with the pressed Pinot Noir juices.

Fishman said he uses a lot of different coopers because he likes that diversity during blending. "I don't like it when I taste a wine and I know what kind of barrel it came from. I don't want the barrel to have that much signature in the wine," he said.

This is where Moller-Racke disagrees. The two work very closely on blending decisions, and the "great debate" during tasting trials is that she loves the idea of having a specific cooper dedicated to a certain block or a certain clone. "But Dan is dangerous in the vineyard and I am dangerous in the cellar," said Moller-Racke, who called the "beauty" of The Donum Estate winemaking program the close "marriage" between vineyard management and winemaking. "We push each other," she said. "Being estate-grown, I have control of all the vineyards, and all the decisions made in the vineyard are always made with the wine in mind," she said.

Moller-Racke and Fishman blind taste their clonal lots to decide which make "the Donum cut," which will be single-clonal bottlings, and which clones may benefit from blending. "There is no 'recipe,'" Moller-Racke explained. Some vintages will see more clonal blends, others will produce clones strong enough to stand on their own. "It's a fresh voice every year," she said.

"That is the world of Pinot. You want to bring out the site...you need to bring out the personality. And that happens in the small unit, not the large," Moller-Racke said.



Packaging

BOTTLING LINE: Mobile Bottling

GLASS: Ardagh Group, ardaghtgroup.com

CORKS: Portocork ICON, portocork.com

CAPSULES: Amcor, amcor.com

LABEL DESIGNER: Anthony Laurino, alaurino.com

SCULPTURE: Ai Weiwei, aiweiwei.com

LABEL PRINTING: CCL Label Industries, cclabel.com

LABELING MACHINE: ENOS T3 labeling machine, enositalia.it

SHIPMENTS: VinLux Transport, vinluxtransport.com

CASE GOODS STORAGE: Groskopf Sonoma, groskopf.com

POS SOFTWARE: Advanced Management Systems, amssoftware.com

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Branding that Appeals to Consumers and Collectors

When you drive up the road leading to The Donum Estate, you cannot help but stare reverentially toward the meditating sculpture that seems to grow, seems to elongate the closer you approach. Though eyes closed, “Sanna, Giant Head,” sculpted by **Jaume Plensa**, greets its guests, offering a sense of peace, tranquility and a stoppage in time.

As you walk the footpaths that line the property, the vineyard is nuanced with a variety of sculptures throughout its acreage—from “Love Me” by **Richard Hudson**, a stainless steel heart reflecting sunlight atop the estate’s highest hill, to “Charging Bull” by **Arturo Di Modica**, strategically placed just feet away from where the estate’s livestock roam, and “Non-violence,” a revolver tied in a knot, created in memory of **John Lennon** but also serving as a nod to Carneros’ “Wild West” history as a coach stop for those shipping produce into San Francisco.

In 2014, Allan Warburg was inspired to combine his passions for fine art and the art of wine by presenting artists from around the world in The Donum Estate property. According to Moller-Racke, the original plan was to have 10 sculptures; today the estate is home to 40.

“What the art allowed us to do was landscape,” Moller-Racke said. “The vineyard is more or less the same, but the area in between wasn’t really used. The art...has allowed us to make it so pretty.”

The art does make it “pretty,” but it has also influenced The Donum Estate’s branding. Inspired by one of the first art installments, “Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads” by **Ai Weiwei**, The Donum Estate changed their label art, starting with the release of the 2014 vintage. Each release features the zodiac animal associated with the vintage. With a special commission, the artist has designed these labels based on the sculpture. This implementation allows consumers to collect The Donum Estate wine bottles as they would art. Thus far, the winery has released vintages from the year of the horse, ram, monkey and, with the release of the 2017 vintage, the rooster. “In 12 years, you can get a case of one with each,” Moller-Racke said. [WBM](#)

Donum Estate 24520 RAMAL RD., SONOMA, CA 95476
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DONUM ESTATE

“Sanna” by Jaume Plensa



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“Hombre Caminante” by Fernando Botero



DONUM ESTATE

“Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads” by Ai Weiwei



DONUM ESTATE

“Mikado Tree” by Pascale Marthine Tayou