

PACIFIC EDGE

HAWAII'S BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

Q+A Hospitality Issue



CEO of Domaine Carneros Winery

EILEEN CRANE

There are few people in the world of winemaking who have been with a winery since its inception, much less over a career crafted 40+ vintages and are still getting better all the time. One such phenom is Eileen Crane, CEO of Domaine Carneros in Napa, California. Thirty-two years ago, she donned a hardhat, and was charged with making the sparkling wines for a new Californian estate in collaboration with the French champagne house of Taittinger. Not only that she was put in charge of building the winery, a replica of the 18th century Chateau de la Marquetterie in Champagne, France, in the Carneros AVA of California. Always guided by confidence, the influence of her upbringing and innate talent, she has thrived in her three decades at the winery, seeing it from construction, to still winemaking to organic conversion and beyond, all the while keeping centered and gracious. In honor of the holidays and her illustrious career, we toast Eileen Crane with this Q & A to learn more about this accomplished woman. A votre sante!

What has changed in your approach or philosophy in the 30 years you've made sparkling wines?

I have learned that growing your own grapes is the surest way to obtain the best quality of wine. We have purchased four Carneros vineyards over the last 30 years and estate grapes make all the difference to our quality. The philosophical winemaking point that has not changed is being meticulous in every step of winemaking.

What about how the American marketplace has changed since you first started making sparkling wine to today?

The high-end U.S. sparkling industry has been benefiting from the Prosecco craze. It seems to me many Prosecco drinkers sooner or later ask "what else is out there" and make a step or two up and find the next quality levels and like what they taste. The current interest in rosé wines is also driving increased rosé sparkling wine production.

Top quality U.S. producers have seen a multi-decade trend toward acceptance that the finest can be produced from top U.S. wine appellations.

You converted your vineyards to organic before it was more of a common industry practice. What fundamental changes have you seen qualitatively and technically since you began farming that way?

Right from the beginning in 1987 Domaine Carneros has tried to live lightly on the land by recycling water and packaging. In 2003, we housed the largest solar collection system of any winery in the world. Over the years, we have operated as sustainable, organic, Fish Friendly Farming and Napa Green. In many ways we have taken the best practices from all and developed a high standard for protecting our Earth.

We know you love to drink a glass of bubbly at night. You've inspired us with your concept of not wanting to wait for a special occasion to have a glass of sparkling...we still love your idea of opening a bottle on Monday and having a glass each night till Friday. Are you still doing that? Has it changed?

Nothing is quite so lovely as a glass of bubbles on a Monday evening. And, if it is lovely then, it works for Tuesday, etc., as well. No need to wait for a special occasion; when you open a bottle of bubbles, the occasion happens.

What is your preferred glass in which to enjoy sparkling?

My favorite champagne glass is the tulip. A long, slender shape that says you are about to have something special but with a big enough bowl to put your nose in and fully appreciate the aroma.

What are your favorite pairings to have with Domaine Carneros from appetizers, main courses and desserts?

My most favorite pairing for sparkling is triple creme cheese or Laura Chenel goat cheese, but I would never limit the sparkling match. Sparkling Rosé with holiday turkey is just terrific! And, I fell in love the first time over a glass of bubbles and filet mignon (I cannot guarantee the same result for everyone, but...).

Please share your entertaining philosophy

Serve the best wine and cook with the best ingredients you can afford, then make it simple so you can enjoy your friends. Just let the quality of ingredients and the sparkle of the event speak for themselves.

What would you point to as your constant source of inspiration? Was anyone in particular a mentor?

Inspiration has come from a wide variety of friends, colleagues, and the many wines I have tried. I am always conscious of seeing new things and thinking how could I or Domaine Carneros use this.

If someone were starting out in your shoes today, with your 30-year perspective, what would you share with them going forward?

Train at UC Davis in enology. Do almost anything to get a production or lab job in a sparkling winery (or winery that specializes in the blend of wine(s) you are interested in). Work very hard, volunteer for extra duties, find a couple of mentors.

Where do you hope to see the wine business in the next 10 years?

I would like to see the wine industry at large continue to offer more managerial and direct positions to qualified women. We are woefully behind as an industry in this.

