

Napa's Most Powerful Woman



In the world of first-class wine making, staying power is a must. Eileen Crane, who first started in the field in 1978, offers something more. She was ascended to the top of the **Domaine Carneros** by Taittinger wine empire as its founding winemaker and president in 1987, where she has stood virtually alone as a woman in the male-dominated wine industry.

More than 30 years later Crane is still hard at work making her signature sparkling wines – the “classic, Audrey Hepburn of wines,” as she likes to say, such as Brut and Blanc de Blancs.

Crane gives the credit of her success to the winery’s Napa vineyards, which are certified organic. “The vineyards have a natural vibrancy,” she says. “They have better balance, more depth of flavor and the wine made from them is so much more aromatic.”

More than producing an eco-friendly company, Crane has expanded Domaine Carneros to include an 18th century-style chateau-

inspired by the Taittinger-owned Château de la Marquetterie in Champagne – in the heart of California’s winemaking valleys, and a second facility to exclusively produce pinot noir wines.

Crane sat down with ForbesWoman publisher, Moira Forbes, to discuss her career and vision for Domaine Carneros’s future.

Moira Forbes: *Domaine Carneros is now certified as an organic vineyard. How is a vineyard classified as organic and what does that mean for consumers?*

Eileen Crane: Domaine Carneros by Taittinger has a long history of being green. In fact, in 2003 we put in the largest solar collection of any winery in the world. We’ve worked on being organic for a long time, meaning you don’t spray for weeds, you cultivate. You don’t spray for bugs, you get natural populations growing. It’s healthier for the people who work in the vineyards, and it’s almost like the vines are happy.

Little by little, I knew this would have an impact on the quality. When you go to a farmers’ market and you buy strawberries in the late spring, think about the flavor vs. what you buy at the supermarket. That’s what happens to grapes that you grow under organic conditions. They have better balance, more depth of flavor and the wine made from them is so much more aromatic.

Do consumers today look for wines that are classified as organic?

Obviously, that varies. Some consumers are very interested. I see a number of restaurants that are

interested in promoting wines that are organic or sustainable. Besides the fact that it's the proper way to manage a vineyard, or that it is safer for all your workers, you're likely to get a finer wine.

What was it like for you to be the founder of Domaine Carneros and steer its evolution through the past decades?

It's been a lot of fun. We are at the base of Napa and Sonoma Valleys. If you come across the Golden Gate Bridge and go into Napa Valley, you will pass by the château on the hill. Well, you aren't allowed to pass by – you need to turn in the driveway, come up on our terraces, watch the vines grow and sip a little bubbly.

One of the joys of Domaine Carneros is to see how it has evolved. When we started, we made just one sparkling wine; last night we enjoyed another one of our three sparkling wines over hors d'oeuvres and cocktails, a rosé. We've also started to make still pinot noir wines. A lot of people now come to the winery specifically for our pinot noirs, which are great classics.

It's a wonderful place to come to sit down and relax. It's not belly up to the bar, as many wineries are. I think many people come here, it's their first stop, they fall in love with us and then we're also their last stop on the way out of the valley.

The winemaking industry has a long rich history. What are some of the most interesting innovations you've seen?

Winemaking is a very slow profession. You plant a vineyard. It takes five to seven years to have a mature vineyard. It takes a winemaker five years to learn a vineyard. A chef may make their signature dish 30 times a night. I've been in the sparkling wine

industry for 32 years, which means I've made mine 32 times. It is an industry of patience.

What do you still want to accomplish in winemaking?

Each vintage, each harvest is its own accomplishment. But I think that in addition to making fine wines, I'd like to see more development of the people who work for me. I'm borrowing from Jim Collins, author of *Good To Great*: I'd like to find a way to really develop the people who work for me and evolve into a more successful team. We have a very successful team, but I'd like to take it to the next level.

By *Moira Forbes* March 25, 2010