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## Winemaker Q&A: Eileen Crane Of Domaine Carneros

**A**N ENOLOGY PROFESSOR ONCE told Eileen Crane she couldn't get a job in winemaking because she wasn't strong enough to push barrels. Today, she is president and winemaker of top California sparkling wine producer Domaine Carneros. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, she took courses at University of California, Davis, then got a job as a tour guide at Napa's Domaine Chandon, moving up to pastry chef for the winery's restaurant and eventually becoming assistant winemaker. In 1987, Taittinger Champagne hired Crane to be the first winemaker at Domaine Carneros, its new California property.



**Q** How has the recession affected Domaine Carneros?

**A** We ended the year up in sales. It's not as good as previous years, but it's up. We're also hearing that because of the [strong] euro, Champagnes have become more expensive. That has created an opportunity for fine California sparkling wines.

**Q** How did you become interested in wine?

**A** My father, a former military police officer, landed on Omaha Beach in France on D-Day, and he became very interested in wine while he was [in Europe]. He came back and headed up the international department at Dean Witter, and we lived in New Jersey. He had a wine cellar. We'd look at the labels and he'd tell me stories about the bottles—where they were from, what the wine would taste like. He let me taste wine at Sunday dinners from the time I was 8. So wine was part of my upbringing, and it was an exciting thing.

**Q** Do consumers still ask whether California sparkling wine has its own style?

**A** People will sometimes say to me, "It's not real French Champagne," to which I'll say, "Theirs isn't real Carneros." It's hard to lump

all Champagne houses or all California sparkling wine producers under one stylistic banner. [Since the] early '80s, there's been a real evolution in California of styles and in appellations. California's cooler climate appellations have become a more important source of fruit. I'm sometimes asked if Taittinger imposed a style upon me. I went through eight job interviews with Taittinger. We tasted and discussed a lot of wines I had made, but once I was hired, they never dictated a style from France. They trusted I was a part of the family, palate-wise.

**Q** How do you determine which clones to use in each blend you make?

**A** People say, "Show me how you do the blends," and I don't have words to describe it. It's almost like I get to the right blend and say, "Ah-ha, that has it." Take our Le Réve. We have five different clones of Chardonnay, and they all offer something different. We have one that's minerally and kind of steely. We have one that comes across as lemon-cream, and one that's got real Muscaty character. I've learned that the Muscaty clone makes really good backbone for body and finish, and heavy cream clone is just right for middle body.

—Mitch Frank and Heather Morgan Shott



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