

KENT RASMUSSEN

History

In 1979 there were very few vineyards planted in the area now called Carneros. Most insiders thought the climate and soil conditions were too extreme for quality grape growing. With no natural barriers to protect it, Carneros receives the full brunt of stiff tidal winds blowing in from San Pablo Bay (the upper half of San Francisco Bay), dropping afternoon temperatures far below those in Napa Valley a few miles north. Heavy fog frequently accompanies the wind, blocking essential sunlight and lowering temperatures even further.

Formed during the ice ages by the receding waters of San Pablo Bay, Carneros soils tend to be dense, shallow and high in clay. Water is scarce, and what little there is reeks of sulfur. Despite the odds, a handful of daring souls had attempted to cultivate wine grapes in Carneros between its homesteading in 1836 and 1942, when Louis M. Martini purchased 200 acres of Carneros property. A few vineyards were planted over the next four decades, but the region went mostly unnoticed until the 1980s.

With these harsh conditions in mind, **Kent Rasmussen** planted his first six acres of Carneros Pinot Noir in 1979. He added two acres in 1981 and two more in 1986. Before long the region gained prominence as word spread about the up-and-coming producers of Carneros, with Kent at the top. A quarter century later he has established an international reputation for growing and producing distinguished Pinot Noir, and Carneros is now considered one of the best growing regions in the world. Kent's earliest plantings were suitably mature to start making ultra-premium Pinot Noir by 1986. He crushed about 10 tons of Pinot Noir and small amounts of other varieties, including Chardonnay, purchased from neighboring vineyards using the tractor shed and garage as a cellar. The wines were very well received and his company started to grow. In a few years, Kent and his wife **Celia Ramsay** were running the winery full time producing great Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Starting in 1989, Kent and Celia launched a second brand, called "**Ramsay**" - Celia's maiden name - which was originally intended to focus on some 'less-than-usual' varietal wines. But as time passed, the Ramsay brand has taken on an entirely different identity, that of a true 'second label'. Best known for its high quality, but lower-price, Ramsay Pinot Noir is often poured by the glass in wine bars and restaurants. The Ramsay-brand line also includes a Cabernet Sauvignon, and a Merlot.

Since its modest beginnings, the Kent Rasmussen Winery has evolved into one of the most important Pinot Noir producers in the Carneros region. The winery outgrew its tractor shed barrel room long ago and was forced to age its wines off-site. In 1995 a new winemaking facility, a former 1930s slaughterhouse, was established on the Silverado Trail in St. Helena. Refined over the years, it now houses business offices, an enology lab and lab tasting room, a wine library and upgraded production equipment. The modern crusher, press, tanks, catwalks, refrigeration systems, pumps, forklift and fruit sorter have greatly enhanced winemaking options. Grapes are now either estate grown or under long term contract with reliable growers.

Looking toward the future, two acres of cabernet sauvignon and 250 olive trees were planted on the St. Helena property in 1999.

Lastly, the '99 crush marked the beginning of a new era for the Rasmussen family. After six years of living in a 960 square foot cottage with their two growing children, Kent and Celia moved into their new home on the St. Helena property. Designed and general-contracted by Kent, the two-story home was inspired by one of their favorites, renowned architect Bernard Maybeck. Made largely of Douglas fir, it features huge outdoor porches, inviting hipped roofs, cathedral ceilings and dozens of old-fashioned, multi-paned windows overlooking the beautifully landscaped grounds and vineyards.