



Calera Wine Company: Stalwart Pinot Icon

"Calera is one of the most compelling Pinot Noir specialists, of not only the New World, but of Planet Earth. Credit must be extended to its visionary founder, proprietor Josh Jensen. Ironically, today Jensen rarely gets the acclaim that these wines merit." —Robert Parker, Jr., 2003

CALIFORNIA has a relatively young Pinot Noir wine history compared to Burgundy, but many of our oldest Pinot Noir producers have shown admirable longevity and pinotphiles are fortunate to still have the opportunity to drink wines from these iconic wineries. In the rush to find the latest, potentially cult Pinot Noir producer, the contributions by these legendary wineries and the consistent excellence of their wines can easily be overlooked.

With this issue, I pay homage to the 2008 vintage of Calera Pinot Noir, the thirty-third offering from this isolated winery in the Mt. Harlan appellation of San Benito County. The first vineyards were planted at Calera in 1975, the first wine released from purchased grapes (Zinfandel) the same year, the first tiny harvest from the three original vineyards in 1978, and the first commercially noteworthy Calera Pinot Noir produced in the 1980 vintage. To reference this in time to other early pioneers of California Pinot Noir, consider that the first Pinot Noirs were produced at Chalone and David Bruce in 1966; at Hanzell in 1967 (some wine was made as early as 1957 but not on a commercial scale); at Hensch Vineyards in 1971; at Mount Eden Vineyards in 1972 (Martin Ray did craft Pinot Noir at this site as early as the 1950s); at Joseph Swan and Davis Bynum in 1973; at Dehlinger and Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard in 1975; at Carneros Creek in 1976; at Navarro Vineyards in 1978; at Iron Horse Winery in 1979; at Sanford in 1981; and at J. Rochioli in 1982 (Joe Rochioli Jr. produced Pinot Noir under the Fenton Acres label beginning in 1976 vinified by Davis Bynum).

Of all these pioneering wineries, only Chalone (and founder Dick Graff) and Calera (and founder Josh Jensen) based their entire success on limestone. Jensen, affectionately known as "Mr Pinot," was a student of and fervent lover of the wines of Burgundy, and was convinced that it was the limestone in the soil of Burgundy that made the wines so special. Jensen has said, "Here in this country, the establishment doesn't think limestone is important. I didn't waste my time debating it. I just saw where the great Burgundies grew and decided to let my wines do the talking." The name, Calera, is Spanish for "lime kiln," referencing the former lime kiln and limestone quarry on the Calera property.

Year in and year out, Calera releases wines of uncommon breeding, even attracting adoring interest from fans outside the United States. Over 42% of sales in 2010 were in the export marketplace and Calera is the ultimate cult wine in Japan where it has been romanticized in a manga adult comic book. Remington Norman elucidates the criteria for great wines of Grand Cru quality in his recent book, Grand Cru. There can be little argument about these standards and Calera Pinot Noirs consistently meet all the criteria: aromatic interest, check; impressive mid-palate attack, check; refined texture, check; balance, check; complexity, check; persistence after swallowing, check; capacity to age in an interesting fashion, check; and class, double check.

Many winemakers have worked under Jensen through the years including Ted Lemon of Littorai and Steve Doerner of Cristom Vineyards, but the wines have always been held to an unwavering high standard. The wines are vinified in a 7-tier winery built into the side of a mountain, the world's first and only completely gravity-flow winery. Because the Calera vineyards are in the Mt. Harlan AVA, but the winery location is technically not, Calera cannot use the "estate bottled" designation on the labels.

Yields have been painfully low at Calera, with an average of about 1.5 tons

per acre, with a number of vintages providing less than a ton per acre. Controlling gophers and other animals at this isolated winegrowing outpost is a full-time job.

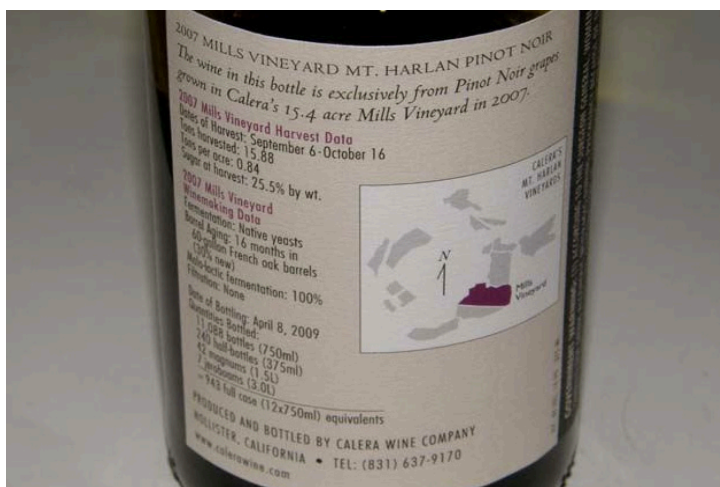
There have been several rumors about where the original clones of Pinot Noir at Calera originated. According to John Winthrop Haeger (Pacific Pinot Noir, 2008), Selleck, Reed and one-third of Jensen are Chalone budwood (which has an unknown origin but probably was a suitcase clone from Burgundy), and two-thirds of Jensen was planted to an unknown nursery clone. Mills was planted from budwood taken from Selleck. The rest of the plantings are presumably from nursery bench grafts originating in California. The Mills Vineyard, the Chardonnay, and the second planting of Viognier are own rooted, while the rest of the plantings are grafted onto nursery rootstock.

Non interventionist techniques are employed including native yeast and whole cluster fermentations with minimal racking. Pinot Noir grapes are fermented warm in open-top fermenters. The lots are pressed after a minimum of 14 days in the fermenter. Aging is in 60-gallon French oak barrels from Francois Frères in Calera's two barrel cellars. The single vineyard Pinot Noirs receive 16 months of aging in barrels, 30% of which are new each vintage. The Central Coast wines are aged for 10 to 11 months in 12 to 15% new barrels. The wines are fined with egg whites to ensure clarity and are bottled after settling unfiltered.

The Calera property consists of 648 acres (plus 440 adjacent acres) with 84 acres planted as of 2006. The vineyards and years planted include: Selleck (4.8 acres, 1975), Reed (4.4 acres, 1975), Jensen (13.8 acres, 1975), Mills (14.4 acres, 1984), Ryan (upper 9.4 acres, 1998 and lower 3.7 acres 2001) and de Villiers (15.6 acres, 1997). The vineyards are situated at an average of 2200 feet above sea level where they receive the cool marine airflow from the Pacific Ocean through the Monterey Bay coast.



I recently tasted the 2008 Calera single-vineyard Pinot Noirs and the 2008 and 2009 Calera Central Coast blend Pinot Noir. Calera vineyards suffered a devastating frost in the spring of 2008 resulting in yields that were extremely low, even by Calera's usual small crop standards. There were only 3 barrels of Reed (sold to wine club members and a few export markets) and 1 barrel of Selleck (24 cases from the 4.8-acre vineyard and not released for sale). The Pinot Noirs that were produced are stunning but the limited production should induce you to act quickly to acquire the wines from the Calera website online store (www.calerawine.com).




com) or the retail marketplace. Better yet, join the Limestone Circle Wine Club to insure receiving all the Mt. Harlan wines. There is no Mt. Harlan Cuvée Pinot Noir and no half bottles offered in this vintage.

The 2008 Pinot Noirs are more forward than many Calera vintages, although all single-vineyard wines showed better the following day from a previously opened bottle and are very age worthy. The de Villiers Vineyard bottling is the most forward and a strikingly good value (\$35). Prices for all the single-vineyard wines are ridiculously low considering the quality and breeding.

The winery's back labels are among the most informative in the wine business.

Calera Wine Company is located at 11130 Cienaga Road in Hollister. Calera welcomes visitors and tasting is available daily from 11:00 AM to 4:30 PM. Directions are on the website. 831-637-9170. The winery recently debuted their new website which is highly informative and visually appealing.

2009 Calera Central Coast Pinot Noir


 14.3% alc., \$24, glass closure. Sourced from seven vineyards in San Luis Obispo, San Benito, Santa Clara and Monterey counties (33% Laetitia Vineyard). Native yeast fermentation, aged 11 months in 10% new French oak barrels. · Moderately light reddish-purple color in the glass. Aromas of cherry glaze, dark red berry jam and black olives. A gentle, lighter styled wine with bright cherry fruit on the modest mid palate attack, finishing with notes of cherry skins, oak, herbs and sandalwood. Well-mannered tannins for easy drinking, but enough structure to match up with hearty fall foods. Good (+).



2008 Calera Central Coast Pinot Noir

14.4% alc., \$24, glass closure. Grapes sourced from Monterey County, San Luis Obispo County, Santa Clara County and San Benito County (50% from Scheid and Laetitia vineyards). 50% whole cluster, native yeast fermentation, aged in 10% new French oak barrels for 11 months without racking. · Moderate dark red color in the glass. Aromas of black cherries, brier, oak and pipe smoke. A brooding wine with little uplifting qualities, offering flavors of sweet black cherries, black raspberries and plums, finishing with a tarry, herbal, earthy presence. More dirt and oak than fruit and pretty ordinary. Decent.

2008 Calera de Villiers Vineyard Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir


 14.4% alc., 1,460 cases, \$35. Yield 2.06 tons per acre. Native fermentation, aged 16 months in 30% new French oak barrels, bottled unfiltered. · Moderately deep reddish-purple color in the glass. Riper fruit profile on the nose offering scents of black currants, black cherries and Asian 5-spice. Moderately intense on the palate with flat out delicious flavors of black cherries and dark plums with an appealing minerality and earthiness underlain with a hint of citrus. Very smooth in the mouth with fine-grain tannins showing up on the richly endowed finish. Even more strikingly aromatic the next day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle, tasting of darker Pinot fruits. An ideal pretense to seduction.



2008 Calera Ryan Vineyard Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir


14.9% alc., 972 cases, \$40. Yield 0.8 tons per acre. Native fermentation, aged 16 months in 30% new French oak barrels, bottled unfiltered. · Moderate reddish-purple color in the glass. Plenty to wow over with the ever-changing nose offering aromas of black cherries, boysenberries, baking spice, graham, dried fruits and subtle oak. Crisp and lively on the palate with earthkissed black cherries and raspberries, showing plenty of chewy tannins but enough bright acidity to offset and bring the wine into balance. Needs time to shed its structurally imposing fruit tannins. A touch of heat peaks out as the wine warms in the glass. Very good.

2008 Calera Mills Vineyard Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir

 14.9% alc., 510 cases, \$45. Yield 0.47 tons per acre. Aged 16 months in 30% new French oak barrels and bottled unfiltered. · Moderate reddish-purple hue in the glass. Plenty of interest in the nose with scents of dark red berries, sandalwood, seasoned oak, and pastry. Vibrant and amazingly intense on the mid palate attack with flavors of dark red berries and dark red cherries wrapped in gentle, fine-grain tannins. The fruit refuses to give up its presence on the spectacular peacock finish. A touch of heat shows up on the nose and finish, but this seems trivial considering the impressive palate presence of this wine. Outstanding the following day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle.



2008 Calera Jensen Vineyard Mt. Harlan Pinot Noir

 14.7% alc., 829 cases, \$70. Yield 0.86 tons per acre. Aged 16 months in 30% new French oak and bottled unfiltered. · Moderately light in color with mainly reddish tones. Subdued but seductive aromas of dark red cherries and berries, charcoal and spice. Lighter in weight than the other Calera single-vineyard offerings in this vintage and unusually light for Jensen. Flavors of ripe strawberries, red cherries and red raspberries with an appealing spice box accent, enrobed in well-proportioned dusty tannins which peek out on the dry and persistently aromatic finish. Very creamy and soft in texture. Calera's signature Pinot Noir, deserving of all the accolades one can muster for this vintage.

