

Josh Jensen

Calera Wine Company, Mount Harlan, California

Limestone is the magic ingredient for this neo-Burgundian winemaker perched atop the Gabilan Mountains.



CALERA



Calera Wine Company

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Catherine Fallis, aka "Grape Goddess," is the first woman in the world to have earned both the Master Sommelier diploma and the Advanced Certified Wine Professional diploma. She is founder and president of Planet Grape LLC (www.planetgrape.com), a wine consulting firm providing education, content, personal sommelier services, and innovative custom systems from Revel Cellars for restaurants, wine bars, retail locations, and personal collections.

Calera had been on my radar from the earliest days of my wine education. I had read about it in the textbooks for Harriet Lembeck's wine course, a prerequisite for my job at Windows on the World in New York City. When Kevin Zraly finally hired me there, I found several Calera wines on his carefully crafted list, and by then I knew that any winery with multiple listings was to be held in the highest regard.

That was in 1989. Ten years and a Master Sommelier certificate later, I found myself face to face with the man behind the winery, Josh Jensen, interviewing him for the *Global Encyclopedia of Wine* at his remote winery in the Gabilan Mountains. Even then I felt a bit intimidated. Here I was, meeting the Oxford-educated, French-speaking, and very precise man whose Pinot Noirs and Viogniers had been recognized as the equals of their French counterparts. Here I was, tasting his great single-vineyard Pinots, young and old, and later, bouncing around in a four-wheel-drive truck at the top of a mountain, in the rugged vineyards the world now knows as the Mount Harlan American Viticultural Area.

Jensen is formal, and his wines are formidable.

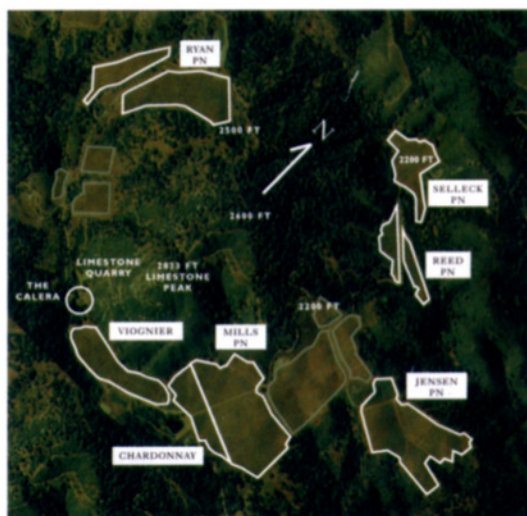
So it came as something of a shock, a few years after that, when I was well ensconced in the San Francisco wine-and-restaurant scene, to find Jensen pulling up at midnight or so in front of the Globe—the favored late-night hangout of front-and-back-of-the-house workers from all over the city, since it served great food until 2 a.m. or later. Here he was, Mr. Limestone, the icon, the Pinot god himself, unfolding his long limbs and stepping out of a tiny red sports coupe, flashing a brightly colored leather biker jacket and sporting a couple of mags of his wine. It was going to be a very good night.

Early this year, I met with Jensen at his beautiful new winery, built on the same spot where we had conducted our 1999 interview in a trailer. Twenty years had passed since my introduction to his wines, yet he had held steadfast to the brilliant course he set out for himself. He was a visionary and perfectionist then, and is to this day.

CATHERINE FALLIS, MS, ACWP

Photo courtesy of Calera Wine Company

INTERVIEW



Calera's gravity-flow winery (top left); Jensen and vineyard manager Jim Ryan (top right); aerial view of Calera vineyards (above); Jensen Vineyard, a 13.8-acre site for Pinot Noir (below).

Did your interest in wine develop more during your childhood in northern California or your student days in Europe?

It started when I was a kid growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area. My first wine mentor was a lifelong friend of my dad's and of mine and a great, great wine collector, expert, and amateur chef: Dr. George Selleck. We subsequently named one of our vineyards after him. So when I was a teenager, I would be tasting the great wines of the world at these very elaborate dinner parties at his house, and that continued on through my college years. Then I went to grad school in England, to Oxford, and that's when I really came to love wine.

What led you to focus on Burgundy for your hands-on education?

I loved the wines of all the regions of France, but I certainly found that the ones I responded to on the most emotional level were the red and white Burgundies. I mean, sure, I would drink really good Bordeaux and Côte-Rôties, and I would say, "This is a terrific wine—it's got this, it's got that," but when I tasted a really great Burgundy, I'd say, "Wow, I'm in love. This is a miracle." And in fact, George Selleck used to always tell me, "The world is divided into Burgundians and Bordelaisians, and never the twain shall meet." I've since observed that same thing when tasting with others. There are lots of people who love them both, but I just personally responded on a very emotional level to the great Burgundies.

So from Oxford you went to France looking for harvest work?

Yes, I just knocked on the front door of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti at the start of the



Gabilan Mountains in San Benito County, Calif.

1970 harvest season. There was this tough old bird there who was the office manager, Mademoiselle Clin. Everybody was afraid of her. She eyed me up and down and said, "Well, I guess you look like you could do the work," and she said, "We start in a week. Come back in a week." I hustled on down to Château-Grillet, next door to Condrieu—because I had also talked to them about picking there—and they said, "We start tomorrow morning." So I drove right down in my little

Citroën 2CV Camionette and did the two-day harvest down at Grillet. That was actually the first winery I ever worked in, and I told them that instead of being paid in money, I wanted to be paid in bottles of Château-Grillet. So for the two long days' work, I got three bottles.

I hope they were good.

Oh, they were memorable. I drank one with André and Dorothy Tchelistcheff when I got back to California. I had met André originally through Dick Graff, and he was a friend and admirer of George Selleck, so we had a dinner party at my mom and dad's house. How I lured him down to this dinner in the East Bay was I had two bottles left of André's biggest success with Pinot that he had made for Beaulieu Vineyards in 1946, and he said he never made one that could compare after that. Selleck had bought that wine at the time of its original release—as I said, he was truly a brilliant wine collector—and two of his bottles had a fair amount of ullage in them, so he just gave them to me. I said, "George, these should still be pretty good." So André and Dorothy came down from their home in Napa, George and Helen Selleck came, and André just was enraptured to taste that wine. But to start the dinner, I served one of my bottles of Château-Grillet, and André said, "This, this is Riesling." I said, "Well, André, actually it's Viognier, it's Château-Grillet." He said, "Young man, I don't care what the label says, this is Riesling," which was great, classic André Tchelistcheff.



How long did you work at DRC?

It was 10 days, the harvest of 1970. It was a great big crop, the kind that they weren't prepared for. In fact, it was one of the rare times that André Noblet, who was the head winemaker then, destemmed everything, for space reasons. All the tanks were filled right up to the brim, and he knew it wasn't all going to fit in if they did their normal whole-cluster fermentation, because stems take up 25% of the volume. That vintage, there were stories in Champagne that people were draining their water tanks and filling them up with wine. It was a really big crop, off the charts—so big, in fact, the wine quality from that year was not the best. Not just the DRC, but up and down the Côte d'Or—large crops and, consequently, a lack of intensity.

So that must've been a good lesson?

Yes. And at that time, the legal Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée upper limit for grand cru in the reds was about 2 tons per acre, 30 hectoliters per hectare. So to this day, 2 tons per acre is our target here at Calera, although we almost never get that much. I said, "Two tons per acre, well, that sounds to me like the limit you want to aim for," and 38 years later, I still think it sounds right. I think if people try to make good Pinot out of 4-tons-per-acre fruit, just forget it. It's going to be insipid.

How did you settle on the site for Calera?

In Burgundy, they have the Côte d'Or, a

Photo by Catherine Fallis



Well, you could try it in Alto Adige. They do some Pinot Noir there.

New Pinot Noir vineyard in foreground with Jensen Vineyard in background.

Our immediate, contiguous, next-door neighbor here at the winery property is a dolomite quarry. You might try your planting idea at their quarry if you don't want to go all the way to Italy. At any rate, I spent two and a quarter years going around the state of California with my little eyedropper, locating these deposits that were drawn on the maps and then contacting the property owner if it looked even

30-mile-long limestone ridge, and all the great vineyards are on the slopes coming down from these large limestone deposits up at the top of the ridge. In fact, the greatest vineyards are halfway down the hill. But then, as you continue on down the slope and out onto the flat, deep alluvial soils of the Saône River plain, they don't even plant Pinot or Chardonnay out there. They plant some Gamay and some Ali-goté, but then not much farther out, they're growing corn and spuds and carrots—I mean, just a couple hundred yards from some of the most expensive farmland, probably *the* most expensive farmland on earth! So I said, "Well, it's gotta be the limestone." When I got back here, I obtained geologic maps that were printed by the State Bureau of Mines. These weren't soil maps, but instead indicated the locations in California of potential commercial mineral deposits. I talked to some of the geologists at the Bureau of Mines, and they were very helpful. One of them gave me a little bottle of sulfuric acid with a little eyedropper. The field test for limestone—which is calcium carbonate, CaCO_3 —is if you drop this acid onto calcium carbonate, it fizzes. Limestone's first cousin is dolomite. Pure dolomite is half calcium carbonate and half magnesium carbonate, so it will also fizz, but you can get it tested by a lab. And in fact, one of the fascinating theoretical questions to me would be, "What would it be like if you planted Pinot Noir and Chardonnay on dolomite slopes?"

slightly promising. Most of these owners were and still are cattle ranchers. I looked mostly in the northern Gabilan Mountains, which divide our county, San Benito, from Monterey County, and which is one of the few regions of the state that has numerous carbonate-rock deposits. There are a few other regions in California as well, such as Santa Cruz, but, for instance, both Napa and Sonoma counties have zero mapped limestone deposits. I know because I went out and looked in both of those counties, and I pored over the maps.

So you found and were able to purchase what is now the Mount Harlan AVA. How did it eventually become recognized as an AVA, and what makes it special?

You have to support your claim to the U.S. government, demonstrating that the area is distinctive, that your potential AVA has some historical connotations, that it is different from other AVAs by climate, wine recognition, topography—you know, everyone's favorite word, "terroir." So we drew the boundaries of our proposal, and they accepted it without any modifications. For most of the eastern portion of the boundary, we used the 1,800-foot-elevation contour line, and then for both the north and south boundaries, we ran lines straight up from there to the tops of the Gabilan Mountains, the watershed, which also serves as the Monterey-San Benito County line. Most of that portion of our AVA is above 3,000 feet in elevation, but all

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parts of the 7,400-acre Mount Harlan AVA are at least 1,800 feet above sea level. Our own vineyards are not here at the winery; they are mostly planted 1,000 feet higher, at 2,200 feet above sea level, and it takes half an hour to drive up there from the winery. Our very highest point, at the top of the Ryan Vineyard, is 2,500 feet above sea level. In fact, in the coastal strip of California where basically all the great wines in the state are made, we now have a total of 83.6 acres, and ours is probably the highest average elevation. I think there are vines planted as high as 4,000 feet in the Sierras, but that is different from the marine influence that we get near the coast.

AVAs can get very dicey and very hard to get approved when you have hundreds of farmers involved. In our case, we were the only people crazy enough to plant grapes up there. There are a couple of cattle ranches, and then just people with deer-hunting cabins. There is no electricity up there, no phones, no paved roads, so it really is old-time California Wild West.

How does your use of native yeasts further differentiate your wines?

We started making wine in 1975 with Zinfandel, and then Pinot Noir starting in 1978, and they were fermented by native or indigenous yeasts from day one. In 1982, we made our first Chardonnay with purchased grapes, and we said, "What if native yeasts aren't right for whites?" So we took the grapes we bought from one vineyard that year and divided the juice into four equal batches. We inoculated three of the quartiles with three different store-bought, commercial-yeast products, but the fourth was not inoculated and thus, presto, became a natural fermentation. Initially, the batches that had been fermented by store-bought yeasts seemed better: one of the criteria they select those yeasts for is rapid settling, rapid clarification. So three weeks after fermentation, those batches looked



Selleck Vineyard with limestone outcropping.

almost like finished wines. Holy smokes! The fourth one, the native batch, was still very cloudy. So initially, of course, the ones that were more settled were going to taste more like finished wine, but after about two months, the natural batch started tasting much more complex.

That's hardly surprising when you think about it, because native-yeast populations contain several strains of yeasts, a multiculture or polyculture, whereas store-bought yeast is one single, selected strain, a monoculture. I learned from the French winemaking texts I read decades ago that you'll typically have a starter colony that will get the fermentation started and will take the wine up to 5% alcohol, at which point that level of alcohol kills those starter yeasts. At this point, the next strain takes over, sort of a middle-distance-runner family that ferments from 5% up to, say, 10% or so, and then they are killed by that high-alcohol level of 10% or the combination of alcohol and acidity. Finally, a third strain or family, the finishers, takes over and completes it to dryness, when essentially all fermentable sugar has been converted into alcohol. So instead of the wine having a single flavor component from one primary fermentation yeast, you have multiple flavors.

We tested that assumption again the next year with the same wine, the 1983 Central Coast Chardonnay. This time, we did three-quarters of it native, one-quarter with the commercial-yeast product we had liked best the previous

Photo courtesy of Calera Wine Company



Calera's newest and largest Pinot Noir vineyard, planted in 1997.

year, with the same result. Since then, we have never looked back. We have never played around with any fancy, modern, designer-yeast products since then.

Do you ever have problems where some of the natural colonies die and the wine stops fermenting, and can you reinoculate with isolated natural yeast?

We occasionally have stuck fermentations, which drive us crazy, but no more than the scientific wineries that use store-bought products all the time. After one barrel or a number of barrels of wine go dry, the yeast will start dying and slowly settle down to the bottom of the barrel. We can then take some of the lees out of the bottom of those barrels and add those healthy, active lees to the barrels that are slowing down, but need a push to finish. That often works. We'll also sometimes put yeast nutrients in if we think there's a nutrient deficiency. We'll stir the lees in those barrels and stir them again repeatedly. We'll warm up the barrels with electric blankets. It's a lot of work, but that's what it takes sometimes. Every winery does these things to some extent.

You are also isolated up here. Do you think that helps keep your native colonies alive and well?

Well, I am not a microbiologist, but my theory is that native yeasts are ubiquitous; they are all around us. As we walk along the sidewalk,

we have yeast falling out of the ionosphere onto us. So my theory is that if you went to Antarctica and you could somehow grow grapes there, you would be able to have a native-yeast fermentation. You don't need to be near some other winery. The wonderful, beneficial indigenous yeasts will come in on the grape skins. The bloom on the skins of the table grapes you buy in the store—those are native yeasts.

The professors at the wine schools in America have al-

ways tried to scare the living daylights out of their poor students regarding natural yeasts, which they invariably call "wild yeasts," a scary-sounding term. When a student would say, "So how about in Burgundy and Bordeaux? They do natural-yeast fermentations there," the answer of the professors was always, "Well, yes, but they've carefully selected special, beneficial yeast strains over the centuries." That argument doesn't hold water. I've seen what they do in Burgundy: there is no selection. They take out all the pomace from all the presses, and they put it back into the vineyard. They're not saying, "Oh, this one's a really good batch of wine; we'll put this back into the vineyard to select brilliant yeasts for the future, but we're going to burn all the others in an incinerator." Everything goes back. The other hypothesis that the professors will advance is that sometimes wild-yeast fermentations could work in old winery buildings because over time, they've had yeast buildups in the winery—in the walls, the barrels, the tanks. But again, I think you often will get new strains every year—you have different weather patterns, and slightly new strains come in one year and not the next.

How have your winemaking techniques evolved over the years?

We like whole-cluster fermentation for Pinot Noir, and we've done that since the beginning. We like 30% new-French-oak barrels for the

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single-vineyard Pinots and the Mount Harlan Chardonnay—also a practice we've done from day one. One difference we made early on was at the suggestion of a visiting French winemaker friend in 1981. He tasted our young Pinots in barrels around Christmastime and asked what we planned to do in the way of barrel-to-barrel racking. These wines were only two or three months old, but we had already racked them once and were planning to rack them twice more the next year. He said

we were racking our Pinots too much, and he recommended only one racking for the entire 15 months they would age in barrels. We did some trials, and within two years, we converted to non-racking. Since 1982, we do not rack our Pinots barrel to barrel. The raw, new wines go into barrel 24 hours after being pressed, and unless something goes wrong, they stay in that barrel until we take them out just prior to bottling. I think that is one of the reasons why our single vineyards can be rather closed when we put them on the market—and we usually put them on the market a year or two older than our colleagues do—because they haven't really had any aeration to speak of.

The other thing that we do differently today compared to our early days is egg-white fining. In our early years, we used to fine with five to six egg whites per barrel, which I'd seen done in Burgundy. And then over the years, we started slowly finding through taste trials that we liked the wines better with fewer and fewer egg whites. For the last 10 or 15 years, we've been averaging about one egg white per barrel. We used to fine the wines in barrels, but we couldn't with our no-racking protocol because you have to stir egg whites in, so we would also be stirring up all the lees that had settled over 15 months. So we now do our egg-white fining in the pre-bottling tank, once we've put the whole batch together. It might have been picked on three different days,



Mills Vineyard, located 2,200 to 2,300 feet above sea level.

each lot fermented in different tanks and then aged in barrels as three separate batches. That gives us the flexibility to be able to decide the final composition. If one of the batches is not good enough, we can make the decision at that late moment not to include it in the single-vineyard wine. This happened with one of our 2005s, when I picked a portion of the Selleck Vineyard too early. I wanted to start moving back to lower alcohols in our wines, but I jumped the gun with about half of Selleck Vineyard, as we found out later. That batch did not have the full, ripe flavors we look for in our wines, instead having a little too much greenness. So we were able to exclude that batch from the '05 Selleck, a terrific wine that would not have been as good if we had combined the two batches.

What prompted your interest in growing Viognier? Can it be as distinguished a variety in California as it is in the Rhône Valley?

I picked at Château-Grillet in 1970 right before heading up to DRC, and I'll never forget the taste of that wine. We've done some comparative tastings of ours with Condrieus and Château-Grillet, and others have sent us results from similar tastings, and our Viogniers do very well in that competitive milieu. Calera is the best Viognier in the United States, in my opinion. I think our spot is special; maybe we just lucked into it. It's only 6.1 acres. We planted the last of it

Photo courtesy of Calera Wine Company



Mills Vineyard, a 14.4-acre site for Pinot Noir.

20 years ago, in 1989. I think it is a perfect alignment of a grape variety and a plot of ground. I think that the Joseph Phelps is noteworthy as well, but it's not a mainstream product for them any more. Many highly rated Viogniers from the other coastal regions of our state are top-heavy and not really stylistically similar to classic dinner wines, and those from the inland parts of the state seem to lack the necessary acidity.

What would be the solution for Viognier producers here, other than the obvious answer of picking less ripe and tasting more Condrieus?

One of the things that I strongly believe in is to never, ever use new oak or even anything approaching new. From day one, we've fermented and aged our Viognier in the oldest barrels we own. In fact, we keep our little stash of extra-old, completely neutral barrels just for fermenting and aging our Viogniers. Currently, these are 12- and 13-year-old barrels, as neutral as a French-oak wine barrel can be. I think the flavors of Viognier fruit are already perfect when the grapes arrive at the winery. They do not need salt and pepper; they do not need paprika, thyme, oregano, or anything else. They arrive here pristine and perfect. We like and use barrel fermentation for this variety, as it imparts a very attractive roundness, fullness, and vinous quality to the wine. I consider that the "personality" they get from fermenting in a barrel is very good,

the first years after I came back to California. Dick Graff became a good friend of mine, and I'd go up there to work and observe. This was when I was still going around the state, trying to buy land with limestone on it and having doors slammed in my face. Dick had the idea to make an affordable, everyday white from French Colombar, from a very old vineyard he'd located. They fermented most of it in a stainless fermenter, but some of it in barrels. And it was a mind-blower to me how different the two were. The juice came from the same press load, but whereas the stainless lot accentuated fruitiness, the barrel-fermented lot had much more of a vinous quality. The latter lot was fuller, more complex—it just tasted more like wine. The tank-fermented one tasted like grape juice that incidentally had fermented. And I never got over that shock; I saw it with my own eyes.

What are the similarities and differences between your Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays and the best of Burgundy?

Well, I would hope the similarities would be complexity, ageworthiness, and distinctiveness. Both would hopefully convey, by what you smell and taste in the glass, a unique terroir. Even in my young, inexperienced days, I knew there was no flavor additive that you could put into your fermenting wine that would make your wine taste exactly like Nuits-Saint-Georges

very welcome, and it lasts the whole life of the wine—which is a little surprising, as the fermentation only takes about three weeks. That is not oak flavor or aroma; you can't detect any vanilla or toasty aromas. That is barrel-fermentation personality.

Do you think this beautiful, silky texture we see both in Condrieu and in white Burgundy comes from barrel fermentation?

Yes. I had this Eureka moment: I was volunteering my labor at Chalone a lot in

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or Chambolle-Musigny. You can't go to the spice rack and just pull something out and, presto, get a Chambolle-Musigny lookalike.

One main difference is that our yields are smaller. We are just in a damn dry area here, and we almost never get enough rainfall to fill our one tiny reservoir. So we almost never achieve our goal of 2 tons per acre for the Pinot parcels and 3 tons per acre for the Chardonnay and Viognier. That is just a reality, our normal state of affairs, and it hit us brutally, in spades, in the 2008 growing season. Our crop in '08 was the smallest on a tons-per-acre basis we've ever had—a function both of the repeated nights of frost at the end of April and a second consecutive year of drought. Other obvious differences between Mount Harlan and what they have in the Côte d'Or are a different lay of the land here, different weather, and different orientations. Our terroirs are therefore going to express different beautiful aspects of Pinot and Chardonnay than the aspects expressed in the Côte d'Or.

Would food pairings be similar, or are there particular nuances of your wines that sommeliers should keep in mind?

For me, Pinot Noirs are a perfect match for birds, any and all birds—chicken, turkey, squab, grouse, pheasant, duck, you name it—and also with salmon, as they always point out up in Oregon and Washington. Pinot also pairs beautifully with red meats. Our Chardonnays can be great with just about all seafood, except maybe oysters, and I think they're also very good with white meats such as chicken and turkey and even pork.

What about for winemaker dinners?

We'll often send off samples ahead of time, and often the chef and sommelier will then have a clear idea of what they want to do. Sometimes they ask for suggestions, but mostly I involve myself with the wines. I'll make suggestions, like doing a vertical of a 2-year-old, an 8-year-old, and a 12-year-old Pinot from the same vineyard. People like doing that, seeing how they develop over time.

Do you still have available library stock?

Yes, we have quite a few older vintages, both of Pinots and of our Mount Harlan Chardonnays, that we have purposefully held back to offer when they reach 8 or 10 or 12 years old. We especially like to see those wines go to restaurants, so that the largest number of individual diners

will be exposed to them and they are accompanied by great cuisine. We always have at least one library offering that is available through our distributors (see box), and often two or three or even more at a time. Not too long ago, Tribeca Grill in Manhattan asked about buying a collection of older wines, and we sold them six bottles each of about 12 different well-aged wines.

How do sommeliers get hold of your wines? What do you recommend they start with if they are not yet familiar with them?

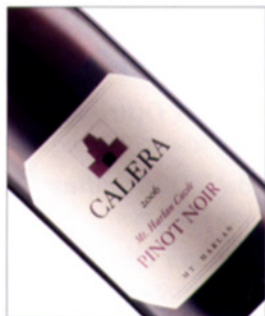
Contact your local distributor first. If they are out of stock, feel free to contact us. Marta Rich is our sales manager—marta@calerawine.com or (707) 996-3705. A number of sommeliers have purchased vertical and horizontal collections of both our Pinots and our Mount Harlan Chardonnay, and they report being very happy with the results.

Is there a correlation between high prices and high scores? Do you think consumers perceive higher-priced wine as higher quality?

Yes to both. The correlation between high scores and high prices: it's not a perfect correlation, but in general, the wines that sell for a king's ransom had better be good, because if they're not, they'll get found out eventually. If you're going to charge \$150 or \$175 or \$200 for a bottle of wine, you damn well better have the quality in the bottle, or else one of these days you'll just have no sales. We've all heard about and tasted an \$80 bottle of wine that we liked better than a \$150 bottle of wine. And even the \$50 bottle of wine could be better than the \$150 bottle of wine, so it is not an immutable correlation.

Your first Pinot Noir was priced on the high side for the time—\$18. What drove you to make that decision?

It was a decision that I made to be near the highest end for Pinot Noirs at that time. No. 1, I did not want to come out with a \$10 bottle price and develop a customer base at that price who would then be very unhappy with us and send angry letters when we started raising the price up to \$18 over the next few years, so I felt it was better not to get the people who would not pay a higher price involved at the start, only to disappoint them later on. I also already knew by the time of that very first release, in 1980, of the 1978 Jensen, Selleck, and Reed vineyards, that our yields were going to be tiny, so the only hope



for the business ever to become viable was by pricing them high. When we sold that first vintage, I felt that the quality was high. I was really happy with the way things seemed to be turning out and felt we deserved to be among the higher-priced Pinots.

Over the next 20 or so years, the market got very competitive. All of a sudden, you raised your prices, and all of a sudden, your wine was good in the eyes of the American wine press, and you were selling out faster than ever before.

We raised our prices dramatically—some of our products more than others—in September 1999. We did a major price increase that I now realize was a mistake. The market really does not like giant price increases. The best sales year in our history was the next year, 2000, so initially, the price increases seemed to work. Then along came the recession—does anyone other than winery owners remember the dot-com bust and hard recession of '01, '02, '03? As near as I could tell, everybody in America stopped buying wine. So we then started a process of lowering our prices over the next few years. In 2005, we started some small, incremental price increases, but today, in 2009, we have not raised a single price in the last three years. I do think that the wineries that took aggressive price increases last year, 2008, are going to regret it badly. We are already seeing in this problematic current economy that the market is punishing those who took excessive price increases. So I learned my lesson.

How are your newest vineyards coming along?

The newest vineyards, two out of the three, are a great success. The Ryan Vineyard, planted 10 years ago, is all the way around the backside of the mountain. It's fun to see it taking on its personality as the roots get deeper. Eventually, it will get the reputation as one of our best. That same year, we also planted three new blocks of Chardonnay, and they're terrific. The younger vines of those three blocks provide a nice, fruity component to our Mount Harlan Chardonnay to go along with the more chiseled, mineral component of the original block planted in 1984.

But the largest block we have ever planted was a field of Pinot Noir in 1997, the year before we planted the Ryan. It comprises 15.6 acres and stretches from the Jensen Vineyard to the Mills Vineyard, but it has not so far made a wine that we felt could stand on its own. The wines we've made out of that field, starting with the 2001

vintage, have all had excessive tannin. We've tried to slice and dice it, pick and ferment various spots or strips separately, pick riper or less ripe. The batches we have made have mostly gone into our Mount Harlan Cuvée, which is our entry-level Mount Harlan Pinot, and sometimes into the Central Coast Pinot Noir. We've tried everything we can think of to resolve the tannin issue, and we may have finally figured it out, because the combined batches from the 2007 harvest are, for the first time, quite nice, and the 2008 batches are really lovely. We may start bottling it as a new, named Pinot Noir vineyard with the 2007, which is still in barrels today. You could say that it proves once again—as if it were necessary—that Pinot Noir is the most damnably site-specific and finicky variety of them all. You can't just say, "Oh, let's go plant 100 acres of Pinot Noir here. I think this will be good for Pinot Noir." You should really just plant 2 acres and run it up the flagpole, see what the wine is like, because there are wineries I know that have made a large 100-acre planting right off the bat with disappointing results, and they've lost a fortune.

Has winemaking taken a toll on your personal life? How do you keep your life balanced?

I think winemaking has been very good for my personal life, and exactly for the reason of balance. I don't think I would say the same if I were a winemaker for a giant winery that makes several million gallons a year, where I'd have to do the corporate paint-by-numbers routine and run all the wines through a bunch of giant, high-tech machines and just sit in a glass booth and fill out work orders all day long. But at Calera's scale, I do like my work and my life because it is extremely varied. I do some writing, I don't do much farming, but I do enjoy visiting my vineyards. I like observing the natural process of grapes being grown and then having a direct hand in turning the grapes into wines and following along their development as they age in barrels, get bottled, and eventually consumed. I like some selling, but not too much. I do quite a few winemaker dinners every year, and I also attend quite a few wine events around the country, and some overseas. And so my workdays do not involve just one type of activity, which might be the case if I were a stockbroker or lawyer or something. Over the years, I've met so many people in the wine-and-food business, and some have become close, personal friends. So I think all those things help keep me balanced. 🍷

