

CALERA PINOT NOIR JENSEN VINEYARD

A Journey Through Time 1978-2013

Since his debut vintage in 1978, Josh Jensen has shown he has the magic touch with Pinot Noir. This once-in-a-lifetime tasting traced the arc of Jensen's brilliant career through a series of remarkable Pinots that set the bar for what is possible in California.

A native of the Bay Area, Jensen attended high school on the East Coast and then pursued graduate studies in England. While Jensen's friends flocked to careers in finance, law and banking after school, Jensen had caught the wine bug thanks to George Selleck, a collector and close friend of his father's. In 1970, Jensen worked the harvest at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. An internship at Domaine Dujac followed in 1971. Later that fall Jensen returned to California with a mission: to find a site rich in the limestone he had been trained in Burgundy to covet. There was only one problem – neither Napa Valley or Sonoma has vineyards planted on limestone.



After consulting with geologists Jensen found the limestone he was searching for in San Benito County and specifically on Mt. Harlan, which is located in the Gavilan Mountain range, south of San Francisco. Even today, Mt. Harlan is extremely rugged and remote. Water has to be trucked up to the vineyards and there is pretty much nothing but the barest essentials at the top of the mountain. It's hard to imagine what things must have been like 40 years ago.

Jensen planted 500 vines in 1974 with cuttings he had brought back from Burgundy, something that would be much harder to do today than it was in the early 1970s. Development in earnest began in 1975 with three parcels, one of which Jensen named after his early mentor, George Selleck. Drought immediately reared its head in 1975 and then 1976, the first back-to-back drought vintages going back to the previous century. Those early experiences served Jensen well, as hot, arid conditions have become increasingly common here over the last few decades. Jensen made his first three Pinots in 1978 and christened his winery 'Calera,' the Spanish word for the limestone kiln on the property that remains intact. Today, the Calera holdings comprise numerous plots, all within Jensen's sprawling Mt. Harlan property.

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Calera's
Jensen Vineyard
on Mt. Harlan

Target yields are around two tons per acre, although those yields are rarely achieved, especially in modern times, when drought has been such an issue. According to Jensen, drought impacts yields quite materially, but has less of an effect on overall quality. From the beginning, Jensen has been a big believer in the virtues of whole cluster fermentation, a practice he first learned in Burgundy. With the exception of the de Villiers, all of the Calera Pinots are done with 100% whole clusters. One of the features of whole cluster fermentation with this fruit is that it drives acids low and pHs high. As a result, the wines are almost always acidified. New oak is around 30%. No Calera Pinot Noir has ever been filtered.

For the most part, all of the wines in this tasting performed brilliantly. There were one or two disappointments, which is normal with so many vintages, but many more pleasant surprises. Because the wines are never filtered, many of the older vintages throw quite a bit of sediment and require decanting, something readers still cellaring these wines should keep in mind. I also found the acid additions a bit more obvious in some of the older wines from the early to mid 1980s, but again, that is not surprising with wines of a certain age. My preference is to drink the Jensen Pinot around age 10-15, but many vintages will continue to develop beyond that. All of the wines in this tasting came from Calera's passive cellar. My sense is that the wines stored in colder cellars will show even better.



The three wines
that comprised
Calera's 1978
Pinot Noir lineup

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The tasting ended with Calera's three 1978 Pinots. Yields were just one ton in total for 24 acres of vineyards, which is a measly 2% of normal production. To put that into context, even the most freakish years I have seen in Pinot Noir, like 2012 in the Côte de Beaune, don't come anywhere near that level. The unusually low yields resulted in dense, massively tannic wines that needed decades, not years, to come together. Jensen took the unusual step of bottling all of his 1978s only in half bottles. Even today, those wines are majestic, and a testament to the vision that has put Josh Jensen and Calera among California's elite Pinot Noir producers.

See all the wines in the order tasted (from youngest to oldest).

– *Antonio Galloni*

Reviews

<p>2013 VINTAGE</p> <p>94 POINTS</p>	<p>The 2013 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is bright, fresh and aromatic, with lovely precision and energy. This is one of the lighter, more perfumed vintages of the Jensen in recent memory. Crushed flowers and sweet red berries abound on the beautifully knit finish. Even though the 2013 is a bit on the lighter side, the 100% whole clusters are totally integrated. Above all else, the 2013 speaks to grace. Josh Jensen adds that total rainfall for 2013 was just 4 inches versus the 15-18 that was normal in what he jokingly refers to as "the last century." This is a surprisingly delicate wine, especially considering the drought conditions. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2033.</p>
<p>2012 VINTAGE</p> <p>96 POINTS</p>	<p>A racy, voluptuous wine, the 2012 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard shows the radiance of the vintage. Sweet red cherries, kirsch, mint, wild flowers and plums flesh out in an open-knit, intense wine built on texture. The 2012 remains quite primary. It can be enjoyed today, but will be even better in another few years, once the aromatics develop more fully and some of the baby fat drops off. Drinking Window: 2017 - 2032.</p>
<p>2011 VINTAGE</p> <p>94 POINTS</p>	<p>Calera's 2011 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is showing beautifully today. Intensely aromatic and light on its feet, the 2011 is all finesse. Sweet herbs, rose petals, hard candy, mint and spices form a super-appealing fabric of aromas and flavors. Today, the 2011 Jensen is gracious, light on its feet and absolutely impeccable in its balance. There is a lot to like here, that is for sure. Just beginning to show the first signs of aromatic development, the 2011 should continue to drink beautifully for another decade-plus. The 2011 has really come together over the last few years. Winemaker Mike Waller adds that the lessons of 2010 made 2011 less of a shock, and that in the end the growing season turned out to be quite normal, but with everything pushed back a month. What a gorgeous wine the 2011 has turned out to be. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2026.</p>
<p>2010 VINTAGE</p> <p>92 POINTS</p>	<p>The 2010 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is intensely sweet and candied, qualities it has always shown from the outset. The 2010 is open-knit and ready to drink now, while it is hard to see considerable potential for further upside at this stage. Crushed flowers, autumn leaves and sweet spices add the final shades of nuance. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2024.</p>
<p>2009 VINTAGE</p> <p>95+ POINTS</p>	<p>The 2009 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is a gorgeous wine for drinking now, as the aromatics are just beginning to show the first signs of complexity. Sweet tobacco, mint, cedar, herbs and dried cherries flesh out in ample, deeply expressive Pinot endowed with real depth. The 2009 should continue to drink well for another 10-15 years. Today, the 2009 is a bit shy relative to how it showed a few years ago, and may be going through an awkward phase as it makes the transition from a young Pinot to a more middle-aged wine. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2025.</p>
<p>2008 VINTAGE</p> <p>94 POINTS</p>	<p>The 2008 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is another very pretty and expressive wine. Floral and savory notes meld into a core of open-knit fruit. Sensual and inviting, the 2008 has enough aromatic complexity to provide plenty of interest, while the firm tannins suggest the 2008 will drink well for another decade-plus. This is one of the more delicate, gracious wines in this vertical. Like all the best Calera wines, the 2008 speaks to balance above all else. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2025.</p>
<p>2007 VINTAGE</p> <p>94+ POINTS</p>	<p>The 2007 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is one of the more fruit-driven, open-knit wines in this vertical. Juicy and up-front, the 2007 is drinking well today and should continue to hold for at least another decade. The style is forward and silky, with soft tannins that add to an overall impression of creaminess. Readers who enjoy more mature Pinots might want to give the 2007 a few more years in bottle, as is still quite young. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2025.</p>

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2006 VINTAGE 95 POINTS	<p>One of the highlights among recent vintages, the 2006 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is absolutely gorgeous. Intensely aromatic yet light on its feet, with superb balance, the 2006 has it all. Sweet tobacco, crushed flowers, mint and dried cherries are some of the many notes that are laced into the finish. The 2006 is striking today, but should also hold for at least another decade. Interestingly, 2006 also is the vintage with abundant rainfall and the highest yields ever at Calera. As a result, a portion of the juice was declassified into a straight Mt. Harlan Pinot that incorporated fruit from all of the Calera sites. Stylistically the 2006 is similar to the 2008, but has a little more depth. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2025.</p>
2005 VINTAGE 94 POINTS	<p>The 2005 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is one of the most powerful, tannic wines in this vertical. Blood orange, pomegranate, spice, white pepper, mint and game give the wine its pungent personality, while the firm tannins convey an impression of power. Although the 2005 is not especially refined, it is striking in its beauty and sheer depth. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2025.</p>
2004 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>A dense, powerful wine, the 2004 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard boasts serious depth and intensity. Sweet tobacco, game, autumn leaves, smoke and licorice hit the palate with a rush of pure texture. The 2004 has more than enough density to drink well for another handful of years, although it will always remain a bit burly. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>
2003 VINTAGE 90 POINTS	<p>The 2003 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is now mature, although it still has considerable intensity for a wine of its age. Dried flowers, tobacco, spices and worn-in leather add shades of nuance. The 2003 is delicate and lilting, while flavors are now fully tertiary, all of which suggest there is no upside from further cellaring. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2017.</p>
2002 VINTAGE 93 POINTS	<p>An exotic, deeply spiced wine, the 2002 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is in a beautiful spot today where the flavors are nicely mellowed by time yet supported by plenty of mid-palate richness. Firm tannis shape the persistent, textured finish. This was the last year in a drought cycle that started in 2000. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2022.</p>
2001 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>The 2001 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard shows notable exuberance from the very first taste. Here the flavors are decidedly dark and intense, with tons of tobacco, cedar, leather and brown spices adding nuance. The 2001 will drink well for another decade, although it is not likely to improve much from here.</p>
2000 VINTAGE 95 POINTS	<p>The 2000 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is another wine in this vertical that truly stands out. Rich and textured on the palate - with considerable aromatic nuance - the 2000 is wonderfully complete today. It also appears to have a bright future, as the flavors aren't totally developed. A kick of acidity on the finish adds brightness. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2025.</p>
1999 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>Sweet tobacco, worn-in leather, smoke, licorice and game open up in the 1999 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard. Powerful and a bit rough around the edges, yet with considerable depth, the 1999 will hold for another 5-10 years, perhaps longer. The style will always a bit burly, so a little air is essential. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>
1998 VINTAGE 87 POINTS	<p>The 1998 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is now fully mature, with slightly brown edges in its color and mushroomy notes in its profile. Any remaining bottles need to be enjoyed now. Josh Jensen adds that 1998 was the last El Niño year at the property. Drinking Window: 2015+.</p>
1997 VINTAGE 90 POINTS	<p>The 1997 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is deep, dense and powerful, with considerable intensity, but also slightly drying tannins that suggest it is best enjoyed sooner rather than later, before the fruit loses too much more of its depth. Sweet tobacco, mint, dried flowers and licorice add shades of nuance on the powerful finish. The tannins are a bit dry today. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2017.</p>
1996 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>The 1996 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is showing very well today. Dark, rich and explosive, the 1996 still boasts tremendous intensity. Black cherries, plums, mint, licorice and sweet spices wrap around the powerful, resonant finish. Proprietor Josh Jense told me that at the time, he considered 1996 the finest wine he'd made. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>
1995 VINTAGE 96 POINTS	<p>The 1995 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is one of the real stand outs in this tasting. An intensely aromatic, perfumed Pinot, the 1995 Jensen is pure silk on the palate. Crushed flowers, sweet red berries, mint and dried rose petal are some of the signatures. The 100% whole clusters are evident, but also deeply expressive and balanced throughout. A host of orange peel, autumn leaves and savory herbs lend an air of Vosne-Romanée-like exoticism to the finish. What a gorgeous wine this is. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>

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1994 VINTAGE 93 POINTS	<p>Calera's 1994 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard speaks to delicacy and finesse above all else. The 1994 is mature but also silky and impeccably balanced, all of which make it a great choice for drinking today. The 1994 won't stay at this plateau for too many more years, but it is incredibly delicious today. Today, the 1994 brings together elements that recall fine, aged Burgundy, but with a real sense of California radiance in the fruit. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>
1993 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>The 1993 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is another wine that has stood the test of time gracefully. Exotic spice, orange peel, leather and mint are all laced together in an effortless, pliant Pinot that is a pure joy to taste today. The 1993 is delicate and open-knit throughout, with lovely palate presence and terrific overall balance. Don't let the light tonality of color fool you, the 1993 offers terrific complexity and depth, especially for a wine of its age. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2017.</p>
1992 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>The 1992 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard retains surprising depth and intensity for a wine of its era. The tannins have mostly melted away, revealing a Pinot built on surprising mid-palate depth and intensity, but with less of an emphasis on aromatics. Slightly angular contours remain and the acidity is just a bit elevated within the wine's overall profile. Still, all things considered, the 1992 has aged impeccably. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2017.</p>
1991 VINTAGE 93 POINTS	<p>The 1991 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is another absolutely impeccable wine. White truffle, orange peel, mint and dried stone fruits meld together as this pliant, beautifully layered Pinot opens up in the glass. All the elements meld together in an effortless, gracious wine built on pure texture. Dried flowers and herbs add lift on the perfumed finish. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2018.</p>
1990 VINTAGE 91 POINTS	<p>A huge, powerful wine, the 1990 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard hits the palate with serious depth and intensity. The flavors are quite dark in a brooding, virile Pinot Noir endowed with a real sense of gravitas. Although not one of the more finessed wines made at Calera, the 1990 Jensen has certainly held up well. Smoke, game, licorice and worn-in leather all hint at full maturity and suggest the 1990 needs to be enjoyed within the next few years. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2017.</p>
1989 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>The 1989 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is super-refined and silky from start to finish. Sweet dark cherries, tobacco, herbs, mint and worn-in leather open up in the glass. Today, the 1989 is super-expressive. Medium in body, the 1989 should continue to drink well for at least a handful of years. Rain during harvest was an issue in many parts of the state, but the amount of precipitation here was much less problematic THAN. Today, the 1989 Jensen speaks to grace above all else. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2018.</p>
1988 VINTAGE 95 POINTS	<p>The 1988 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is remarkably beautiful and light on its feet, which is incredible, considering the minuscule yields of just a half ton per acre. Sweet, perfumed and gracious, the 1988 boasts striking inner perfume, striking depth and fabulous balance. The long, pliant finish suggests the 1988 will drink well for another few years, although I can't imagine it will be more expressive than it is today. Drought conditions and tiny yields combined to produce a head-turning Pinot that is still dazzling today. According to proprietor Josh Jense "1988 was the worst drought year we had seen until the current cycle. I thought our vines were dying. We were trucking water up to the vineyard five times a day, which is unheard of for any kind of farming." Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>
1987 VINTAGE 93 POINTS	<p>The 1987 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is intriguing. Dark, powerful and intense, the 1987 is a bit rough around the edges, but it certainly is not lacking in personality. The style is ripe, intense and forward, but at the same time, the firm tannins have helped preserve a measure of freshness and tons of overall intensity. Even today, at nearly thirty years of age, the 1987 is bursting with energy. Nineteen eighty seven is one of those rare vintages that brings together quality and quantity," says Jensen. "Everyone was happy; the public, sommeliers, wine writers and the accountants." Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>
1986 VINTAGE 94 POINTS	<p>The 1986 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is simply magnificent. An expressive, open-knit bouquet melds into layers of a dark red stone fruit in an impeccably layered, voluptuous Pinot. The long, sweet finish is completely irresistible. Still fresh for a wine of its age, the 1986 will drink well for at least another few years. Delicate and finessed throughout, the 1986 is without question one of the many highlights in this tasting. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2018.</p>
1985 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>The 1985 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is another terrific wine from the mid-1980s. Although not as complex or nuanced as the 1986 or the 1987, the 1985 still has a lot going on. Sweet tobacco, mint, dried cherries and anise are some of the many notes that open up on the finish. All things considered, the 1985 has held up well. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2018.</p>
1984 VINTAGE 83 POINTS	<p>The 1984 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is remarkably deep for a wine of its age, but there is also a fair amount of brett that masks the fruit. Both bottles I tasted were essentially the same. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2016.</p>

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1983 VINTAGE 95 POINTS	<p>The 1983 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard has aged impeccably. The flavors are intense and pungent, while the color is remarkably intense for a wine of this age. Black olives, herbs, tobacco, leather and menthol hit the palate as the 1983 gradually opens up. The 1983 is sweet, layered and incredibly perfumed from start to finish. With time in the glass, the 1983 turns brighter and more focused. “The 1983 was so pale in color when it was young, I thought about not releasing it at all,” said Josh Jensen. “We released our three 1984s first, and then came out with the 1983 Jensen a year later. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>
1982 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>The 1982 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard comes across as a bit compact and linear in this tasting, but it still has plenty of energy. Sweet tobacco, wild flowers, mint, dried cherries and worn-in leather are laced into the finely-knit finish. Somewhat faded and ethereal, the 1982 is a wine to drink now and over the next few years at most. This is another where the addition of acidity peeks through. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2018.</p>
1981 VINTAGE 91 POINTS	<p>The 1981 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is wonderfully aromatic and nuanced, with a good bit of acidity that gives the wine its energy and keeps the flavors bright for a wine of this age. Although not as complete as the best wines of the 1980s, the 1981 has aged gracefully. Any remaining bottles need to be opened sooner rather than later. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2018.</p>
1980 VINTAGE 90 POINTS	<p>Calera’s 1980 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is burly and fully mature, but it has also stood the test of time well. Still dense and powerful, the 1980 is an excellent choice for drinking over the next handful of years. Sweet black cherries, smoke, licorice and tar add complexity in a decidedly dark, tannic Pinot. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2018.</p>
1979 VINTAGE 89 POINTS	<p>The 1979 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is powerful, deep and remarkably tannic for a wine of this age. Dark cherry, plum, smoke, tobacco and licorice flesh out in a distinctly brooding, structured Pinot. This is a tremendous showing for a 36 year-old California Pinot made from young vines. Hints of Brett peak through from time to time, but frankly there is more to like than not like. Yields were just a half ton per acre.</p>
1978 VINTAGE 92 POINTS	<p>The 1978 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is a remarkable wine, as it retains an almost unbelievable amount of fruit for a wine of its age, especially considering it was bottled exclusively in half bottle. The tannins are huge, while the flavors remain virtually primary. Most amazingly of all, the 1978 does not appear to be fully mature! Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>
1978 REED 89 POINTS	<p>The 1978 Pinot Noir Reed Vineyard comes across quite powerful and tannic, like all the 1978s here, although the flavor profile tends towards the more savory and ferrous end of the spectrum, with the fruit pushed into the background. Iron, smoke and blood are some of the notes that add character. Here the tannins have proven to be a bit overpowering. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2018.</p>
1978 SELLECK 93 POINTS	<p>The 1978 Pinot Noir Selleck Vineyard is the most elegant of Calera’s three 1978s. Dried flowers, sage, tobacco, soy and black stone fruits flesh out in a textured, viscous Pinot long on intensity and depth. The integration of fruit and tannin is at its most complete in the Selleck, a wine that has stood the test of time beautifully. Drinking Window: 2015 - 2020.</p>

