

Calera's California Pinot Noir Legacy Stays Strong

Josh Jensen protégé Mike Waller keeps the founder's spirit alive at this pioneering Central Coast winery in the Mount Harlan AVA



Calera winery's Pinot Noir vines in California's Mount Harlan AVA (Chris Leschinsky)

By [James Molesworth](#)

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"I knew early on I wanted to make Pinot," says Mike Waller.

Looking at where he is today, it's safe to say the 46-year-old winemaker couldn't have wound up in a better spot. Waller oversees production at [Calera](#), in the Central Coast's Mount Harlan AVA, just a 20-minute drive south from the small town of Hollister, Calif.

Waller's tenure started under the wing of Calera's legendary founder [Josh Jensen](#) in 2007, and he was kept on when [Jensen sold Calera to the Duckhorn Portfolio in 2017](#). It's a full-circle return for the Hollister native who spent time at [Chalone](#), [Saintsbury](#) and [Beringer](#) before Calera.

“I’d bump into Josh at events and just got to know him first that way,” says Waller. “And one day he asked me to come to Calera and help.”

Jensen passed away earlier this year and, even though he sold the winery in 2017, his presence is still felt here. The winery is a rudimentary [gravity-flow](#) set up, running down the face of a steep hillside, much like the nearby vineyards. There are few bells and whistles.

“Josh was a pretty frugal guy,” says Waller with a nostalgic smile. That frugality may likely have been born of Jensen’s hardscrabble approach to founding Calera. He was a true pioneer here, setting up shop before any other vineyards had been planted, and today Calera remains the only winery in the Mount Harlan AVA.

In the early days, Jensen lived out of a trailer—without electricity—planting the site’s limestone soils to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The property spans 600 acres, with 80 of them planted to vines (75 percent Pinot Noir).

Driving up to the site on the tight, winding dirt road, a bobcat carrying a squirrel home for lunch darts in front of Waller’s truck. And when you reach the summit and look down on the site’s patchwork of parcels, the idea of “pioneering” takes on new meaning. It feels very remote here.

With the vineyards averaging more than 2,000 feet in elevation and average rainfall of just 15 to 18 inches, it’s literally high and dry, resulting in extremely low-yielding vines—about 1 ton of fruit per acre. Annual production is around 5,000 cases.

Calera’s Pinot Noirs have long been known for their longevity. The wines are built on vibrant acidity and bony tannins, with the charm of their fruit emerging slowly over time. Waller also prefers old vines (even lower yields) for their concentration of fruit. “We really value old vines here,” he says. “You get past 20 to 25 years and the fruit is deeper, the tannins softer. They’re special.”

But the vagaries of less-than-ideal vine material and the viticultural techniques of decades past are showing their vulnerabilities, with some spotty density as some vines fail while others are nursed along. It’s a delicate balance for Waller’s replanting program.

“We replant each vineyard partially [each year],” he says. “Sometimes it’s within an existing parcel. Sometimes we plant an extension of the vineyard first and then go back and redo the original plantings. Sometimes it’s vine by vine. The goal is to maintain the old-vine character while keeping up the vineyard health and also minimizing the loss in volume from larger scale replants.”

Just getting a truck with supplies up the hill to the vineyard is an adventure, notes Waller. It would seem the pioneering spirit needs to remain strong here to keep making a go of it.

As for any changes to the winemaking, Waller has slowly shifted to a slightly longer 18-month *élevage* in 30 percent new oak, up from about 15 months or so.

“They can handle it,” says Waller of the wines. “They have the tannin.”

Other than that, though, you’d be hard pressed to identify any major change here since Jensen handed the reins to Waller.

“The cool thing was that Josh and I had a sense of ripeness that was similar. So I don’t think there’s been any style change here,” he says.

While the soil remains fairly constant through the site, the parcels feature varying exposures and elevations that necessitate a lengthy harvest here.

“We usually start picking deVilliers and the Ryan shortly thereafter,” says Waller, referring to the parcels by their names. “At the same time as Ryan we usually pick a part of Jensen, but Jensen having different exposures could last three to six weeks to get the whole lot. Next is usually Selleck, then onto Mills and lastly Reed.” Waller notes that Mills and Reed, being last into the winery, tend to be the outlier parcels, stylistically.

“Mills can be a little more earthy, with bright red fruit, while Reed tends to be bright red fruit as well but with more savory and spice,” he says. “DeVilliers tends to be dark fruit-forward with a rounder feel. Ryan gets both the light cherry and dark hints with dried herb. Selleck teeters on the red fruit range with everlasting depth. Jensen is fleshy fruit through and through with layers of dark complexity.”

Waller demonstrated the Jensen parcel’s dark complexity and ability to age with a bottle of **1996 Calera Pinot Noir Mount Harlan Jensen Vineyard**. At first pour it’s still dark in color, offering up dark tea, dried savory and black cherry notes. With coaxing in the glass it gains more depth and flesh, with the fruit spilling ever-so-slightly over the sides of its rigid framework. The wine’s energy, like Jensen’s, is still very much evident here.

With Waller providing a key bridge from Jensen’s tenure to the new ownership, Calera is a bright example of how the sale of a winery needn’t be cause for concern among consumers, but rather how an important legacy can be maintained from one generation to the next.

<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/calera-s-california-pinot-noir-legacy-stays-strong>