



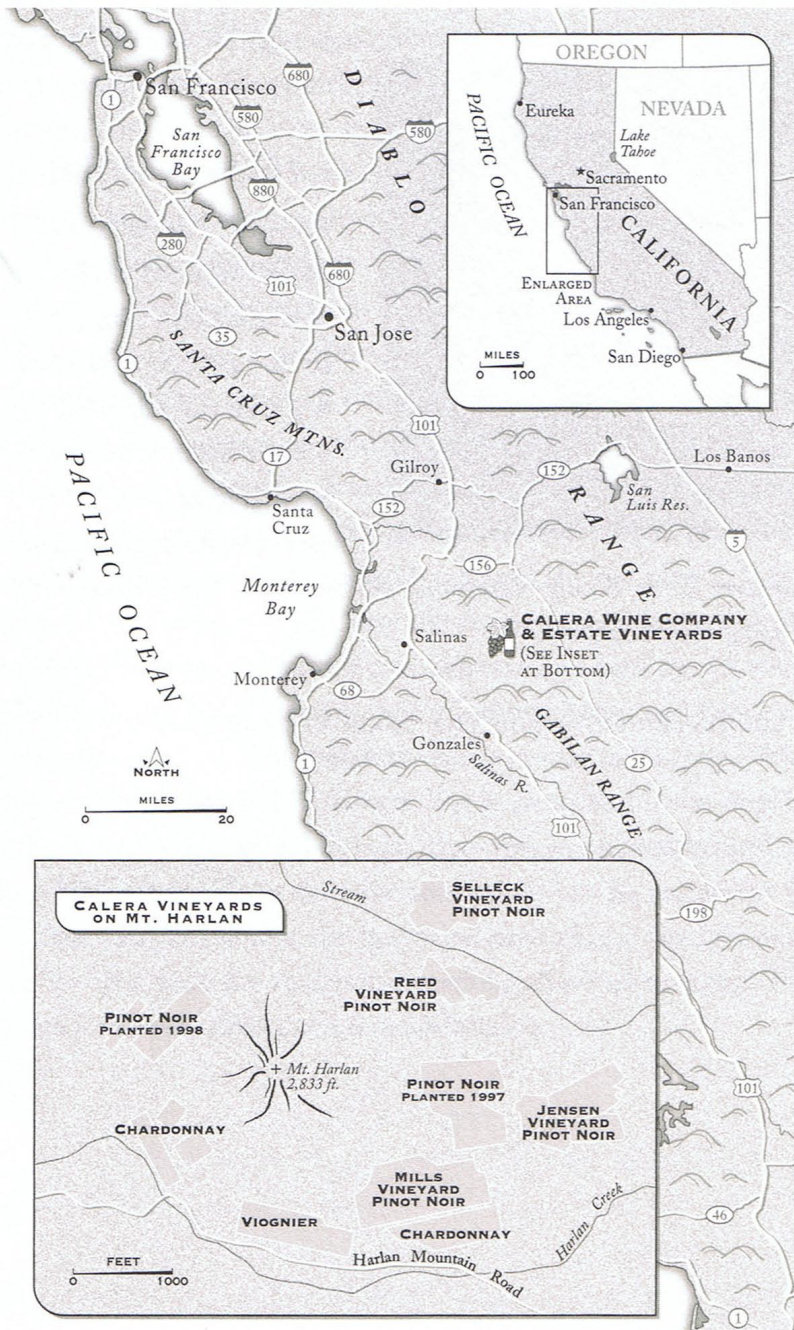
 *The*  

GREAT WINES  
*of*  
AMERICA

*The Top Forty Vintners,  
Vineyards, and Vintages*

 **PAUL LUKACS** 

*author of AMERICAN VINTAGE*



THE CALERA VINEYARDS ON MOUNT HARLAN

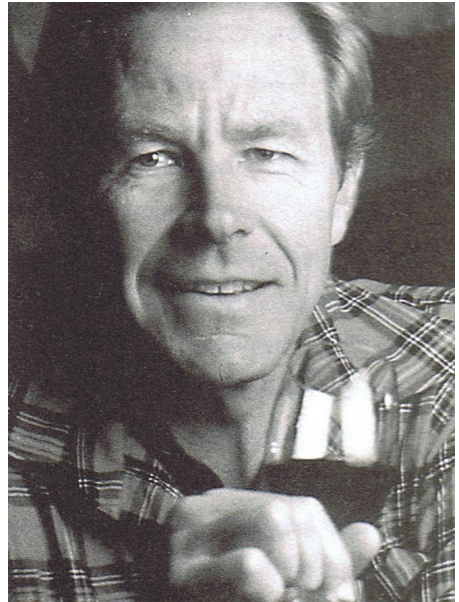


CALERA WINE COMPANY  
PINOT NOIR, JENSEN VINEYARD

*Mount Harlan, California*

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The theme of the Calera story is fixation, one man's obsessive quest to master the variables of viticulture and vinification that distinguish majestic wines from merely mundane ones. The fixations started literally from the ground up. Because grand cru red Burgundies are made with Pinot Noir grapes grown on the limestone slopes of Burgundy's Côte d'Or, Josh Jensen, Calera's owner, began his pursuit of American Pinot perfection by searching for limestone. He found a substantial deposit of it atop a remote mountain in California's San Benito County, far removed from more celebrated (and more comfortable) wine country. So he moved to isolated Mount Harlan in order to grow grapes, to make wine, and to live. But the limestone by itself cannot account for the rich complexity that characterizes his Calera Pinots. As important are all the other aspects of Jensen's fixation; his insistence on extremely low yields in the vineyards, his use of only indigenous yeast for fermentation, and his design of a gravity-flow winery in which each



*Josh Jensen*

lot of wine receives minimal handling in its passage from press to barrel to bottle. At Calera, wine quality is all that matters. All that Josh Jensen does and does not do to his grapes and his wines provides evidence of his obsession.

Jensen is single-minded in his quest for quality, and the results speak for themselves. Ever since he released his first Pinot Noirs in 1978, he has demonstrated what at the start was thought near impossible—that California can produce world-class wines from this most temperamental and finicky grape variety. His top wines taste distinctive rather than derivative, reflecting the earth and spice of their specific locales as well as more generic California sun and heat. They are a breed apart, and their individuality can be traced back to Jensen's own, his admittedly compulsive fixation on this grape and this wine. His has been a thirty-five-year, at times quixotic quest, but he has done much more than tilt at windmills, for Calera today has an unmatched track record for superlative American Pinot Noir.

The Calera winery, a converted rock crushing plant, is located on a windy road some ten miles south of the town of Hollister, on the eastern flank of the Gabilan Mountain Range. The grapes grow farther up, way up, between 2,200 and 2,500 feet above sea level, making these some of the highest elevation vineyards in the United States. The surrounding landscape is untamed and beautifully rugged, with groves of live oaks and pines surrounding the meticulously tended vines, and scrubby chaparral brush interspersed amidst the white limestone. There are four established Pinot noir sites, and two newer ones just beginning to come on line. Currently, these young vineyards have not yet been named, but the four older ones all honor people important in Jensen's life. The 14.4-acre Mills, planted in 1984, is named for a former neighbor and friend. The much smaller Reed consists of only 4.4 acres, and pays tribute to one of Calera's original investors; the 5-acre Selleck is named for a man whose passion for wine first sparked Jensen's own; and the larger (13.8-acre) Jensen Vineyard memorializes his father.

These last three vineyards were all planted in 1975, primarily with Burgundy cuttings, though Jensen does contain some bench grafts pur-

chased from a nursery in St. Helena. Each site's contour and exposure is distinct, and the wines reflect as much. Over the years, all four have produced some superb bottlings, but Selleck and Jensen have done so most consistently. They are Calera's two grand crus, and the wines from them taste subtly different. Each vintage has its own character, but with time in bottle the Selleck Pinots tend to seem more floral and delicate, the Jensen wines earthier and more muscular. The two are equally good, but because the Jensen Vineyard is larger, and because it carries the owner's family name, the wines from it are somewhat better known.

In addition to these single-vineyard Pinots, Josh Jensen also makes small amounts of Chardonnay and Viognier from Mount Harlan grapes as well as larger batches of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from purchased fruit. But the estate Pinot Noirs are what make his heart skip a beat. They—or at least the idea of them—are what brought him to this wild, remote spot, and they are what he has devoted his life's work to producing. That's because for Jensen, then and now, Pinot noir makes most of the world's finest wines. Greatness does not happen always or often, even with prized terroirs, but “when everything is right with Pinot Noir,” he says, “when Pinot is in a good mood—well, then it's as good as it gets.”

“I like to call Pinot Noir the especially grape,” Jensen continues, “because almost any generalization you can make about grapes and wine is especially true with Pinot Noir.” In both vineyard and winery, the tendency toward the extreme is what renders the variety so temperamental. For example, wine quality will suffer with any grape variety if yields get too large. With Pinot, however, the drop-off is precipitous: half a ton too much and the wine will taste thin and acidic. Similarly, all wines spoil if exposed to too much air. Pinot, though, always flirts with flavors hinting of vinegar, so an extra breath of oxygen can send it over the edge. So, too, any wine will lose color if racked or filtered excessively: but Pinot, being thin-skinned, suffers more than others. And most important, while all grapes are site-specific, Pinot Noir is especially. As Jensen says emphatically, “With no other variety does it so obviously matter where the vines are.”

Jensen learned that lesson as a young man in Burgundy. He had grown up in a fairly affluent San Francisco suburb, where he was introduced to wine by George Selleck, a friend of his father's. But he only began to drink it regularly when he went to Oxford to pursue a graduate degree in anthropology. He lived in England for over two years, had wine with dinner virtually every evening, and fell in love with red Burgundy. So, after Oxford, he decided to visit the source, the Côte d'Or, where he got a job picking grapes at the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, considered by many to be the world's greatest Pinot producer. This was in 1969. The air was filled with unrest, and Jensen sensed something comforting, something stable, in the rustic simplicity of the Burgundy harvest. He remembers feeling reassured by how basic everything was. As he puts it, "I was enthralled that the greatest wines in the world were made by the most bare-bones methods." That was when he decided to devote his life to wine rather than academics. He spent the next couple of years in France, working part time in wineries, befriending vintners, and reading the relevant texts. Though he found he enjoyed all sorts of wines, the ones that kept thrilling him were the premier and grand cru Burgundies (still affordable back then for someone on a budget). And when he asked his co-workers what made these so special, he kept getting the same answer: "It's the soil, the limestone soil."

Limestone abounds in the Côte d'Or because the region was once covered by shallow seas. Over millions of years, petrified shells and carbonate of lime from sea water gradually hardened into rock. That rock is now in the subsoil, where a vine's roots will wend through cracks and fissures in search of water and nutrients. No one can say for certain to what degree its presence accounts for the distinctive character of top red Burgundies, their famed *goût de terroir*. On the one hand, the many vineyards located nearby that lack limestone produce notably lesser wines. On the other, many limestone-rich areas elsewhere in the world do not produce good wines at all. Still, when Jensen returned home and assessed the variables involved in the production of the wines he loved, he kept returning to limestone—not as the determining cause, but as an important

contributing factor, “I didn’t think that I’d necessarily get great wines just by planting in it,” he explains “but I did think that planting on it would increase the odds. And since the whole thing was a gamble anyway, I wanted the best odds I could get.”

Back in 1971, when Jensen started looking for property to buy, planting Pinot Noir in California and attempting to make complex, nuanced Burgundy-styled wines was indeed a big gamble. Many people had tried, but very few had succeeded. Most American Pinots at the time were either thin watery will-o’-the-wisps, or stewy, hot clunkers. Virtually none displayed anything even resembling finesse. The problem was that the vines often were planted in the wrong places—in climates that were too hot, and in soils that were too fertile. Jensen, who had little experience with California wines, instinctively understood as much. So when he looked for potential vineyard land, he looked not just for limestone but also for relatively cool temperatures, which in California means a marine influence. In addition, he wanted hillsides, good drainage, a variety of exposures and fairly infertile soils, so that the vines wouldn’t overcrop. And, since he didn’t have a fortune to squander, the property had to be affordable. It took him two full years, but he found all he desired high up on Mount Harlan, in a site that had once been a lime quarry, replete with an old kiln (*calera* in Spanish). The only drawback was that it is in the middle of nowhere.

Being so isolated and so fixated on a single goal would cost Jensen his marriage and in large measure define his life. Calera became his passion, and there is more than a hint of melancholy in his voice when he talks about the choices he made in order to pursue it. “Yes,” he admits, “it can get lonely up here.” Yet he was not really alone. In fact, he wasn’t even first. Around the turn of the last century, a Frenchman, Maurice Tamm, also had gone searching in the Gabilans for limestone. Tamm found it on the western side of the range, up above the Salinas Valley, where he planted grapes—mostly Chenin Blanc. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir went in later, and those low-yielding vines were what compelled another Burgundy fanatic, Richard Graff, to purchase the property in 1969. Graff and

his partner, Phil Woodward, called it by its old name, “Chalone,” and the Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs they produced there brought them fame. When Jensen first tasted a Chalone Pinot from barrel, he enjoyed a shock of recognition. “It was my eureka moment,” he remembers. This wine wasn’t what he knew from France, but it shared a certain grace, which was precisely what other California Pinots lacked. Chalone would go on to become part of a publicly held group, and the wines, while often very good, would become for a time quite variable. But Jensen’s experience with them was in its own way as important as his earlier experience in Burgundy. “Tasting Dick Graff’s wine showed me,” he says, “that it could be done here. That I wasn’t chasing rainbows.”

To get it done, Jensen followed the minimal intervention mode he knew from Burgundy. He didn’t crush the grapes, use commercial yeast, or pump or filter his wines. Instead, he fermented the whole clusters, including the stems. (Calera doesn’t even have a crusher-destemmer, something that Jensen calls “a doomsday machine.”) He then allowed nature to follow its own course, overseeing the aging process to prevent spoilage or contamination, but not intervening so as to control or dictate the results. In the early years, when Jensen harvested his Pinot Noir at roughly 22 degrees of brix or sugar in order to yield a wine with a Burgundian level of approximately 12 percent alcohol, the wines seemed thinner than he wanted. He began picking riper fruit in 1982, so that the wines now finish with about 13 percent alcohol, but his old-fashioned, non-interventionist winemaking protocol has remained otherwise unchanged.

This minimalist approach to winemaking is in its own way more difficult than an intrusive one. The vintner needs to have a clear vision, and to know exactly how to pursue it. Jensen soon realized that he needed help with the latter, particularly with the more scientific aspects of winemaking. So in 1976 he advertised for an assistant, someone with training in biochemistry but without preconceived ideas about wine. He found just the right person in Steve Doerner, then a senior at UC Davis. Doerner moved down to Hollister, and for the next sixteen years helped make the wines that established Calera’s reputation.



This proved a very good partnership, with Jensen supplying the vision and winemaking direction, Doerner the scientific expertise. Eventually, though, Doerner tired of it—of the isolation and routine, and of not being able to realize his own vision and make his own wines. So in 1992 he left for Oregon, where at Cristom he today crafts one of the very few American Pinot Noirs that can rival Calera's. Since then, Jensen has worked with four assistant winemakers: Sara Steiner, Belinda Gould, Terry Coulton, and now Corneliu Dane. A native Romanian, Dane handles the day-to-day winery operation, but the big decisions remain very much Jensen's. As he notes firmly, "I have the final say."

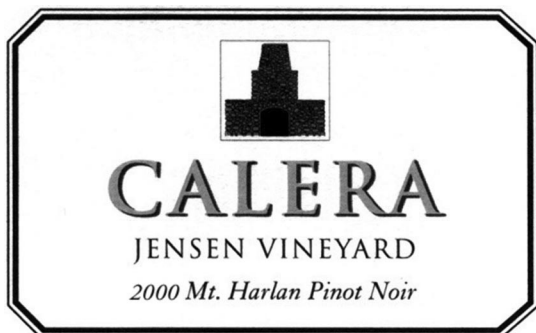
He has the final say in the vineyards, too, but often defers there to the advice and counsel of Jim Ryan, his vineyard manager. Ryan has worked at Calera since 1979, and so knows the property intimately. When asked what makes the Jensen Vineyard special, he points first to the diversity of exposures, noting that the site occupies a small ridge, with slopes that go off in all directions at once. "That's why it takes so long to pick," he explains; "usually a full month from the first pass to last." Ryan speculates that the soils play a factor as well. "There's real diversity there too," he says. "It's not just limestone, but the influence of limestone on everything else. "Ryan and his crew farm all the estate vineyards organically, and they carefully manage irrigation, the supply of water being limited up in the mountains. Thin, rocky, nutritionally poor soils combined with little water result in pitifully low yields—anywhere from under 1 ton to 3 tons per acre. The average at Jensen is 1.53 tons, or roughly half the amount that in Burgundy is permitted for premier crus. When asked if that might be too low a yield, Jensen simply shrugs. "It's what we get here," he says. "To have more, I'd have to go somewhere else."

The Pinot Noir grapes from the Jensen Vineyard are picked ripe enough to be fully flavored (at between 23 and 24 degrees of sugar), but not so ripe as to be raisined. "We've always tried so hard," Jensen explains, "to be sure our wines don't taste pruny." They then are trucked down to the winery, where they ferment in open-top 2,000-gallon tanks for two weeks. The young wines next go into barrel, all French oak and

primarily from the famed François Frères cooperage, where they rest and mature for some sixteen months. All this movement occurs by force of gravity, Jensen having designed the winery so as to minimize the need for handling and potentially bruising the wine. “It’s another especially,” he says. “Pinot Noir especially does not like to be handled roughly. My goal is to be as gentle as possible with it.” The 1978 vintage was the first to be made in this facility, and nearly every year since has seen some addition or improvement—a new press or bottling line, new barrel cellars built into the hillside, a new laboratory, a real office. “For fifteen years, our office was a trailer,” Jensen notes. “I wanted to get the winery done right first.” No surprise there. At Calera, the wine always comes first.

Looking back over more than thirty years of his Pinot noir fixation, Jensen acknowledges that “we’ve been around a long time now.” So long in fact, “that maybe we don’t always get the recognition I think we should. But when people taste our wines, they know how good they are. I think we’re hitting the nail squarely on the head now.” As with any Pinot producer, even the famed Burgundy domaines, not every wine from the Jensen Vineyard is spot on. But tasting a series of vintages reveals far more successes than slips. Taken as a whole, the wines display a consistent style and character, with dark cherry-flavored fruit, herbal secondary notes both in the bouquet and on the palate, a hint of tartness in a long, layered finish, and a firm but not at all astringent structure. Neither as fleshy as most other top American renditions nor as earthy as top Burgundies, they are truly individualistic.

As a varietal, Pinot certainly remains more variable than Cabernet or Chardonnay, but first-rate American versions are no longer the anomalies they were when Josh Jensen first came to Calera. “I like to think,” he says, “that we had something to do with that.” Though no other obsessive vintner has followed him up the side of Mount Harlan, the principles he has preached and the practices he has followed have been adopted wherever people are serious about Pinot. “My job,” he concludes, “is to make the best damned wine I can. With it, I then make converts—one person, one glass at a time.”



A NOTE ON  
VINTAGES:

*Most good California  
Pinot Noirs need a few  
years of bottle age to  
begin to express the*

*non-fruit, secondary flavors that can make this varietal so enticing.  
Calera's Jensen Vineyard Pinot, however, tastes complete and complex  
virtually from the start. It ages very well, becoming ever more nuanced,  
but does not need much extra time to be delicious. Strong vintages on  
Mount Harlan include 1989, 1992, 1996, 1999 and 2000.*

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