

ARTICLE ARCHIVE

CALIFORNIA'S ROMANEE-CONTI

A Remarkable Tasting: Calera Pinot Noir Verticals

Spring, 2003

I had the privilege, and for the most part, enormous pleasure, of tasting through many of the single-vineyard Calera Pinot Noirs. There are four vineyards, the Selleck, Reed, Jensen (all planted in 1975), and Mills (planted in 1984). This huge vertical established several points. First, the winery seemed to go through a transitional stage in the early 1990s, when the original winemaker, Steve Doerner, left to pursue winemaking in Oregon. Most of the vintages of the eighties were, and remain, spectacular. They are tributes to the extraordinary potential of these vineyards to produce world-class Pinot Noir. As in Burgundy, producing Pinot Noir is often a challenge, and sometimes the wines miss badly. Nevertheless, enough great wines emerged from this vertical tasting to convince anybody that **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. Hopefully, the result of this tasting will encourage wine lovers to revisit Calera's wines.

All the Calera Pinot Noirs vineyards are planted on Mount Harlan in the Gaviilan Mountains appellation. The wines are generally made with whole clusters, meaning there is no destemming. The wines are punched down multiple times daily, indigenous yeast vineyards kick off the fermentations, and the wines spend 16 months in François Frères coopered barrels, of which approximately 30% are new. There is no racking or filtration, but an egg white fining is done prior to bottling. The vineyards are planted on pure limestone at 2000 feet or higher, making Calera one of the few California vineyards to have soils similar to Burgundy's Côte d'Or.

One of the interesting aspects of Calera Pinot Noirs (which is perhaps explained by the remote, rather marginal climate), is that production figures vary significantly. The Mills Vineyard production can vary from a low of 700 cases to a high of over 1,500 cases depending on the yields of a given vintage. Yields can be as low as less than one ton of fruit per acre to as much as 3.5 tons. Production of the small Reed Vineyard ranges from 300 cases to 900 in an abundant year. Yields are generally over 3 tons of fruit per acre, although many vintages have less than 2 tons per acre. The same is true for the Selleck Vineyard where yields can be 1 ton or less per acre, but rarely exceeding 2.5 tons of fruit per acre.

According to Calera, the thirteen year average crop yield for the Mills Vineyard was 1.37 tons per acre (the equivalent of 21.9 hectoliters per hectare), the eighteen year average for the Jensen Vineyard was 1.53 tons of fruit per acre (about 23 hectoliters per hectare), for the Reed Vineyard, 1.5 tons of fruit per acre (22.5 hectoliters per hectare), and the Selleck Vineyard's eighteen year average was 1.44 tons of fruit per acre (approximately

21.6 hectoliters per hectare). These are very low yields by any standard of measurement.

CALERA PINOT NOIR MILLS VINEYARD

This south-facing 14.4 acre vineyard (2,200 feet elevation) is situated nine miles south of Hollister. It was planted in 1984 from Burgundy cuttings brought to California by proprietor Josh Jensen. Vine spacing is 6 feet by 10 feet, with 726 vines per acre. The Mills Vineyard is directly planted with no grafting.

2002 (89-91) - Sweet, ripe, candied black cherry characteristics emerge from this dark ruby-colored Pinot Noir. With medium body, excellent ripeness as well as length, and plenty of plump flesh, it should be a candidate for an outstanding rating when released.

2001 (87-90) - Spice box, earth, forest floor, and sweet autumnal notes cascade from the glass of this rich, medium-bodied, concentrated Pinot Noir. Although less fleshy and savory than its younger sibling, it is finely made.

2000 90+ - Low yields of 1.1 tons of fruit per acre (16.5 hectoliters per hectare) resulted in a medium ruby-colored Pinot offering a big, sweet nose of strawberries, cherries, spice box, and cloves. Medium to full-bodied, with moderate tannin, this pure, earthy, concentrated effort needs another 1-2 years of cellaring. It should drink well for 10-15 years.

1999 92 - One of the strongest efforts in this vertical, the 1999 boasts a dark ruby color as well as a gorgeous perfume of currants, plums, figs, and earth, sweet, full-bodied flavors, good underlying acidity, ripe, well-integrated tannin, and a long, impressive finish revealing hints of underbrush and flowers. Drink this Burgundian-styled, fruit-filled Pinot over the next decade.

1998 87 - Dark plum ruby-colored with amber creeping in at the edge, the 1998 reveals composty/herbal aromas with hints of caramel and underbrush in its distinctly more vegetal, earthy personality. As the wine sits in the glass, scents of cherries also emerge. It appears to be on a fast evolutionary track, so consumption over the near term (4-6 years) is recommended.

1997 90 - This fully mature, outstanding Pinot Noir exhibits a dark garnet color with lightening at the edge. A sweet bouquet offers aromas of smoke, plums, cherries, and minerals in a delicate but forceful style. It is expansive and sweet on the palate, with good spice, excellent purity, medium body, and a long finish displaying admirable acidity as well as tannin.

1996 90+ - One of the deepest colored wines of this vertical, the 1996 possesses abundant aromas of black cherries, earth, and a cherry cough syrup-like flavor profile with tremendous depth as well as tannin, body, and muscle. Not the most delicate or elegant of these Mills Pinots, it is one of the beefiest and richest. It should drink well for another 7-8 years.

1995 77 - The 1995 is extremely herbaceous and green, with pinched, compressed flavors, medium body, and notes of tobacco, Provençal herbs, and green tea. Some sweet fruit is present on the palate, but the finish is short as well as abrupt. This is one of my least favorite of the Mills Pinot Noirs.

1994 90 - Big, spicy, smoky, forest floor-like aromas intertwined with scents of plums and

a Domaine de la Romanée-Conti-like gaminess are found in this sweet, ripe, medium-bodied Pinot. While fully mature, it is in no danger of falling apart. With good underlying acidity, this is a delicious, very fine effort for the Mills Vineyard.

1993 91 - A dark garnet color with amber hues is followed by aromas of plums, figs, currants, cherries, and roasting smells. This complex, aromatic Pinot Noir possesses a supple texture, a round, dense personality, tremendous lushness, medium to full body, and a long, concentrated finish. Drink it over the next 3-4 years. It is one of my favorite older vintages of Mills.

1992 88 - More stemmy than other vintages, with a certain herbaceousness as well as earthiness, the 1992 offers up hints of saffron, cinnamon, spice box, and cherries. This distinctive effort tastes like herb-infused root beer. I enjoyed it despite its unique personality. Drink it over the next 2-3 years.

1991 88? - A touch of volatile acidity is noticeable in this offering, but it is not off-putting. The dark plum/purple color is accompanied by autumnal/forestry floor aromas. There is plenty of concentration, but the wine is slightly disjointed as well as stemmy. As it sits in the glass, more vegetal characteristics emerge. My instincts suggest this Pinot Noir is on the verge of cracking up.

1990 89? - Drunk from a magnum that had a touch of cork, enough fruit was showing through to get a bead on the wine's quality. It is a big, deep, medium to full-bodied, still lively Pinot that is capable of further evolution. Young, vibrant, sweet, and layered in the mouth, it reveals notes of cinnamon, spice box, and saffron. This is a pretty offering, but the slight corkiness was distracting.

1989 92 - Still young and vibrant, the sweet 1989 proves how long-lived the Mills Vineyard Pinot Noirs can be. Cinnamon, saffron, cola, black cherry, and earth characteristics are found in this medium-bodied, spicy, impressively endowed effort. I hesitate to say it, but most 1989 red Burgundies I have tasted do not possess the vibrancy and youthfulness exhibited by this California Pinot Noir. Although not a profound wine, it is an outstanding, complex Pinot with 5-7 more years of life ahead of it.

1988 94 - My favorite Mills Vineyard offering to date, the 1988 is an amazing tour de force in Pinot Noir winemaking. The color is a deep plum/purple, and the bouquet offers up a spectacular aromatic profile of black fruits, gamey, roasted meats, underbrush, and flowers. Dense, full-bodied, opulently-textured, and remarkably sweet and pure, this extraordinary Pinot Noir will last another decade. It admirably demonstrates what the limestone soils of Calera's Mt. Harlan vineyard can produce. A brilliant wine still in its adolescence. Wow!

1987 ? - This bottle was slightly corked, and attempting to extrapolate what it might taste like from an uncorked bottle was not easy. It seemed pinched and compressed, and, following the blockbuster 1988, it was underwhelming. Discounting that, it appeared to be a wine of lower stature.

CALERA PINOT NOIR REED VINEYARD

The smallest of Calera's Pinot Noir vineyards (4.4 acres), the Reed Vineyard is planted with 726 vines per acre, and has a cold north/northeast exposure. It was planted in 1975 on grafted root stocks of St. George.

2002 (90-92) - This deep plum/ruby-colored offering is still a primary barrel sample possessing tremendous density, sweet fruit, an excellent texture, and outstanding purity as well as length. This should be a very fine vintage.+

2001 (87-88) - A lower-keyed, simpler, less voluminous version of the 2002, the well-made 2001 Pinot Noir Reed Vineyard exhibits hints of root beer, herbs, and earth in a medium-bodied, monochromatic style.

2000 89+ - Made from yields of 1.23 tons of fruit per acre (18.4 hectoliters per hectare), the light ruby-colored 2000 is an overtly spicy (spearmint, dried herbs, allspice, and cloves) effort revealing a Domaine de la Romanée-Conti-like earthiness in its flavors. A bit jagged at the edges, with noticeable tannin, tartness, and stemmy characteristics, it should age nicely for 7-8 years. It could easily merit an outstanding score for its complexity alone.

1999 90 - A deep plum/ruby color is accompanied by aromas and flavors of forest floor, compost, ferns, and sassafras. Medium to full-bodied, concentrated, spicy, and earthy, it should be consumed over the next 7-8 years.

1998 78 - Not my style, the 1998 exhibits tart, high acidity, stemmy, lean flavors, distinct vegetal characteristics, and a medium-bodied, compressed palate. The result is an intellectual, but unsatisfying Pinot Noir. Drink it up as it will only become more attenuated with age.

1997 87 - Mint, white chocolate, spice box, cherry, and plum aromas emerge from the bouquet of this medium-bodied, attractive, well-made, but generally unexciting Pinot. Consume it over the next 5-6 years.

1996 90 - The dark plum/garnet-colored 1996's big, earthy, foresty, cherry, and plum-scented bouquet is followed by a well-made, pure, sweet, medium-bodied wine. Enjoy it over the next 8-10 years.

1995 77 - Notions of cedar and cooked vegetables are a prelude to this medium-bodied, spicy, herbaceously flavored Pinot Noir of no significant interest. Drink it up.

1994 72 - Aromas of herbal tea and mint are followed by a green, lean, somewhat mean, medium-bodied wine revealing barely enough fruit to cover its bones. Drink it up.

1993 88 - This deep ruby-colored 1993 exhibits some amber at the edge. Distinctive aromas of roasted beets and root beer are followed by cherry fruit, good ripeness, and medium body. It is a very good effort.

1992 82 - Dark plum-colored with an amber edge, this is a lean, stemmy, earthy Pinot Noir displaying more spice, earth, forest floor, and autumnal notes than fruit and depth. Drink it over the next 3-4 years.

1991 76 - Spearmint and sassafras make an appearance in this medium-bodied, shallow, tart, undernourished Pinot Noir. Drink it up.

1990 89 - A dense plum/purple color is accompanied by a sweet nose of cola, root beer, earth, and black fruits. This offering avoids the distinctive vegetal/minty characteristics found in other vintages. It possesses fine ripeness and sweetness, medium body, and an

earthy, singular style. Drink it over the next 5-6 years.

1988 90 - My favorite Reed Vineyard Pinot Noir, the 1988 appears to have achieved full phenolic ripeness, always a challenge for this north-facing vineyard. It boasts a deep plum/ruby color along with a sweet perfume of red and black fruits intermixed with underbrush, sassafras, beet juice, and subtle herbs. Drink this medium-bodied, ripe, layered, attractive Pinot over the next 4-5 years.

1987 87 - Although lean, beginning to dry out, and revealing a sour finish, the 1987 possesses a sweet attack as well as copious quantities of plum, fig, and berry fruit, medium body, and a decent texture. Fully mature, it requires consumption.

CALERA PINOT NOIR JENSEN VINEYARD

This 13.8 acre vineyard (726 vines per acre) was planted in 1975. It has exposures in all four directions. The vines are grafted on the root stock known as St. Georges. The Jensen Pinot Noir's performed at a grand cru level in this vertical tasting.

2002 (90-94) - Loads of fruit, fat, and flesh are apparent in this primary, dense, concentrated 2002. Sweet in aroma, attack, and flavor, it should turn out to be a terrific example of a Jensen Pinot Noir that should drink well for 15 years.

2001 (89-91) - This is a lower-keyed, but still provocative, complex wine with top-flight aromatics, loads of flavor, good sweetness and glycerin, and plenty of red as well as black fruits competing with earth and floral scents. It will not be as long lived as the 2002, but should provide immense pleasure for 10-12 years.

2000 93+ - The 2000 Pinot Noir Jensen (yields of 1.06 tons of fruit per acre, or 15.9 hectoliters per hectare) exhibits a deep ruby/purple color as well as complex, sweet forest floor aromas intermingled with smoky, gamy, cherry and strawberry jam scents. This olfactory smorgasbord is followed by a big, firmly structured Pinot that requires 1-3 years of cellaring. Long, complex, and potentially superb, it will last for 12-15 years. It's a beauty, but more backward, and less showy as well as open-knit on the palate than some of the other Calera Pinot Noirs.

1999 95 - A spectacular young Pinot Noir (one of the greatest New World Pinots I have tasted), the 1999 Jensen Vineyard boasts a deep ruby/purple color as well as a phenomenal bouquet of black raspberry, cherry, currant, white flower, and forest floor scents. Dense and full-bodied, it is explosive on the palate yet neither heavy nor overdone. An extraordinary expression of Pinot Noir, this penetrating, staggeringly concentrated, yet elegant and gracious 1999 should drink well for 12-15 years. Wow!

1998 88 - Greener and leaner than the profound 1999, the 1998 exhibits a dark plum/ruby color along with a sweet attack, a narrow, medium-bodied mid-palate, and a spicy, heady finish. Consume it over the next 5-7 years.

1997 88 - This minty-styled, dark ruby-colored Jensen Pinot Noir reveals notes of Japanese green tea and spearmint as well as a lean, medium-bodied, dense, tart finish. It should age well for 10-12 years, but how much charm will emerge remains debatable.

1996 90 - Surprising aromas of chocolate intermixed with scents of tomato skin, roasted meat, and red fruit jump from the glass of this deep, medium to full-bodied, distinctive, unique Pinot Noir. Its aromas and flavors are atypical of Jensen Pinots, but it is an

outstanding effort. Enjoy it over the next 7-8 years.

1995 83 - Herbaceous, stemmy, compact, and short, the undistinguished 1995 should be drunk up.

1994 ? - Sadly, this bottle was corked.

1993 89 - Soft and fully mature, the dark garnet-colored 1993 reveals considerable amber at the edge. Offering notes of coffee, cola, tomato skins, black cherries, and plums, its plush, precocious style suggests it requires consumption.

1992 89 - A deep color displaying some amber at the edge is followed by a big, spicy, earthy Pinot possessing more depth, structure, and flesh than the 1993, as well as a harder edge to the tannin. The latter characteristic negates its attractive aromas and attack. Hints of cinnamon, fennel, and sweet caramelized/candied cherry fruit are also noticeable. Drink it up.

1990 90? - The Calera Pinot Noirs are never shy or uninteresting, but the 1990 Jensen is uncharacteristically monolithic and young. Tasted blind, I would have thought it to be a 4-5 year old Pinot. This deep, concentrated, virile, powerful 1990 still needs time. Will it emerge from its one-dimensional stage and provide even more impressive drinking? It will keep for another 5-10 years.

1989 ? - This bottle was badly corked.

1988 96 - One of the most profound Pinot Noirs I have ever tasted ... anywhere, this extraordinary 14-year old wine remains extremely youthful in spite of its majestic display of aromas and flavors. Boasting prodigious concentration in addition to a stunning smorgasbord of aromas (Japanese soy, candied red and black fruits, autumnal leaves, forest floor, and caramels), it is opulent and dense, with spectacular concentration, medium to full body, and surprising lightness in the mouth. This stunning effort proves that this vineyard can compete with France's most magical red Burgundies. Not yet fully mature, it should evolve for another decade. Unbelievable wine!

1987 91 - Sweet cinnamon intermixed with hints of soy, mint, and black as well as red fruits are enticing in this deep, medium to full-bodied, expansively flavored Pinot Noir. Long, lusty, and beautifully concentrated, drink this gorgeous offering over the next 3-4 years.

CALERA PINOT NOIR SELLECK VINEYARD

This 4.8 acre vineyard (726 vines per acre) was planted in 1975 with St. George root stock. This south-facing vineyard proved to be the most consistent and prodigious in this vertical tasting. While there have been some disappointments, profound Pinot Noirs have emerged from this vineyard.

2002 (92-94) - A brilliant effort, notes of smoke, dried herbs, earth, and sweet red and black fruits emerge from this full-bodied 2002. With a lovely texture, good integrated acidity and tannin, as well as a persistent, promising finish, this extra special Pinot Noir will drink well for 10-15 years.

2001 (89-91) - A deep plum/purple color is followed by aromas of cherries, raspberries, cola, and beet roots. Deep, rich, and concentrated, without the power, depth, and

succulence of the 2002, it requires 2-3 years of cellaring, and should last for 12+ years.

2000 90+ - Made from yields of one ton of fruit per acre (15 hectoliters per hectare), this saturated ruby-colored 2000 boasts aromas of celery seed, earth, cloves, spice, and red fruits. Structured, dense, powerful, and muscular, with plenty of meat on its bones, it has more in common with a Jensen cuvée than its two siblings. Still closed, with obvious spiciness as well as depth, give it 1-3 years of cellaring, and drink it over the following 12-15 years.

1999 95 - A prodigious effort (the finest since the 1988), the 1999 Selleck Pinot Noir exhibits a dense plum/purple color as well as a sensational, big, sweet perfume of candied red and black fruits, smoke, espresso, soy, and Asian spices. It possesses great stuffing, full body, tremendous intensity, and a pure, concentrated, formidable finish. This outrageous Pinot Noir can compete with the finest made on Planet Earth!

1998 86 - This was a challenging vintage for Calera's single vineyards, but the 1998 Selleck has turned out reasonably well. A dark ruby color is accompanied by herb-tinged berry fruit intermixed with notes of earth, spice, and background wood. Although medium-bodied and slightly compressed, it offers attractive drinking. I doubt that more will emerge with further aging, but it should provide pleasure over the next 7-8 years.

1997 92 - Sweet aromas of mint tea intermixed with cherries, plums, beets, and saffras jump from the glass of this ripe, expansive, powerful, medium to full-bodied, spicy, deep Pinot Noir. Drink it over the next 10-12 years.

1996 90 - The deep ruby/purple-colored 1996 Selleck Vineyard reveals aromas of cola, black fruits, and a touch of herbaceousness in its foursquare personality. Deep, rich, and impressively endowed, it should drink well for another decade.

1995 88 - Exhibiting a smoky, singed leather component as well as notes of cinnamon, allspice, and cloves, this is a spicy, medium-bodied Pinot. The color reveals some amber at the edge, so consumption over the next 4-5 years is suggested.

1994 89 - Fully mature, the 1994 exhibits plenty of amber at the edge of its dark garnet color, a soft, supple attack as well as mid-palate in addition to abundant amounts of clove, cherry, plum, roasting spices, and hints of black tea. This soft Pinot requires consumption.

1993 69 - This medium garnet-colored wine offers soft, curranty, herb-infused aromas and flavors with smoky ashtray and tobacco leaf notes in the background. The finish is short as well as diffuse.

1992 86 - A distinctive herbaceousness dominates this garnet/amber-colored 1992. Medium-bodied and fully mature, there is no reason to push your luck any further, as this wine appears to be cracking up.

1991 55 - Aggressive notes of volatile acidity are beyond what I am willing to tolerate. Notes of plum liqueur intermixed with tea, soy, Asian spice are accompanied by a lean, disjointed, flawed Pinot Noir.

1990 50 - Huge levels of volatile acidity are totally unacceptable. This wine is disjointed, badly made, flawed, and virtually undrinkable because of the volatile acidity. That's a

shame as the wine certainly has plenty of personality.

1989 89 - A big, sweet nose of forest floor, mushrooms, sassafras, and beet juice jumps from the glass of this dark plum/garnet-colored wine. Medium-bodied, ripe, seductive, and fully mature, it should be consumed over the next 3-4 years.

1988 92 - Deep ruby/purple-colored with lightening at the edge, this 1988 has magnificently stood the test of time. Still an adolescent, this full-bodied Pinot Noir offers notes of earth, fresh mushrooms, black cherries, and cola interwoven with a touch of meaty, smoked game characteristics. Rich, dense, and powerful, this stunning effort should improve and last for another decade.

1987 ? - This bottle was badly corked.

—Robert Parker

eRobertParker.comSM is a service of eRobertParker.com, LLC
Email: info@erobertparker.com
Copyright © 2003 - The Wine Advocate, Inc. All rights reserved

Except as otherwise expressly permitted under copyright law, no copying, redistribution, retransmission, publication or commercial exploitation of this material is permitted without the prior written consent of The Wine Advocate, Inc.