

WINERY OF THE YEAR 2011

Wine & Spirits

CALERA

Founded: 1975

Winemaker/Owner: Josh Jensen

Viticulturist: Jim Ryan

Acres owned: 83.6 planted

Annual production: 33,575 cases

Estate grown: 17%

Known for: Long-lived, singular pinot noirs from a limestone-laced mountaintop.

Location: Hollister, CA

Website: calerawine.com

Several years ago, Burgundy soil guru Claude Bourguignon made a comment that Josh Jensen couldn't get out of his head: "Wines made from shallow-rooted vines will express the grape variety, the cépage, and wines made from deep-rooted vines will express the terroir." Jensen asked how far down vine roots could conceivably go, and Bourguignon didn't hesitate: 25 meters. He recounted being 80 feet underground in a cellar and looking up to see a vine root poking through the ceiling.

Set 2,200 feet above sea level on Mt. Harlan in central California's rugged Gavilan Range, Jensen's vineyards have always produced site-driven pinot noirs. But after that conversation, Jensen decided to take things one step further. He began irrigating less frequently in the hope that his vines would follow the water deeper into the rock. Though the site gets a meager 15 inches of rain in a good year, he now irrigates only once per growing season, leaving the taps running for a full 48 hours so that the water will soak deep into the mountain's crevices.

In Jensen's gravity-flow winery farther down the hill, the winemaking regime is focused on minimal handling to preserve the integrity of each vineyard block. Whole clusters proceed directly into small open-top fermenters without undergoing a cold soak. Since day one, Jensen has fermented his wines without any yeast inoculation; he believes that biological diversity in the local yeast population translates into greater complexity in the finished wine. All of the wines leave the winery unfiltered.

Being true to the site has meant, at least lately, putting

up with some unseasonably warm weather. Jensen says the climate has shifted since he first planted his vineyards, and he is quite open about what he believes to be its effect on Mt. Harlan and his wines. "The change between 1975 and today is that, when the fruit gets up to 24 degrees Brix today, it doesn't have ripe flavors," he observes. "It has green and vegetative flavors. I absolutely guarantee you that if we picked at 24 degrees Brix, nobody would like it." Rather than manipulating the wines in an attempt to recapture the past, Jensen is committed to letting the wines evolve along with the mountain: "In my opinion it means we just have to put up with higher alcohols than we used to look for."

The long, moderate 2007 vintage produced powerful pinot noirs that are viscerally Mount Harlan. The '07 Selleck, grown on Jensen's rockiest, most limestone-rich vineyard, is so densely mineral-inflected that it almost comes across as monolithic. But its 14.8 percent alcohol is seamlessly contained, and the pure, finely detailed fruit suggests a brilliantly nuanced future as the wine uncoils over the coming decade. The '07 Reed, also from the original 1975 plantings, is comparatively delicate, coming off 4.4 acres of a north- to northeast-facing hillside that's among Calera's last to ripen. It smells like the hillsides of Mt. Harlan in its fresh, wild herbal character, touching on fennel and raspberries. It too will be worth watching through 2020 and beyond. —L.S.

