

WINE



Josh Jensen stands amid Calera's vines, which are rooted in limestone soil on Mount Harlan. Contrails of jets, whose flight paths crisscross above the vineyard, linger in the sky.

2007 WINEMAKER OF THE YEAR: JOSH JENSEN, CALERA

Traditionalist from the ground up

By Jon Bonné | CHRONICLE WINE EDITOR

Call him Mr. Limestone.

As a cellar grunt in Burgundy, Josh Jensen became convinced that the calcium-rich soils of the Cote d'Or were the secret to the region's wines. He returned home to California and spent two years traversing the length of the state, looking for a limestone-rich parcel.

He hit pay dirt on the slopes of Mount Harlan, a 3,278-foot peak in the Gavilan Mountains that divide Monterey and San Benito counties, and planted 500 Pinot Noir vines to test whether grapes could grow in such an inhospitable place. They thrived, and he named his winery Calera, a nod to the Spanish word for the abandoned 19th-century limekiln near Mount Harlan's peak, a remnant of its prior use.

"The accepted wisdom in 1975," he says, "was that Pinot Noir in America was no good, and it would never be any good."

For the past 32 years, he has toiled atop his 3 million tons of limestone, proving his hunch. Quite simply, Calera's Pinot Noir is unlike any other, anywhere. It is grown in soils that mimic what makes Burgundy special, on a rugged outpost that could only be in California. Jensen's minimalist winemaking reveals unique qualities in each of the five named vineyards on Mount Harlan. To stand in the narrow creek bed that separates the Reed and Selleck vineyards, and then taste their two vastly different wines, is an object lesson in terroir.

Yet all the wines have depth and tannic structure rarely found in Pinot Noir made outside Burgundy, vibrant years after most of their California counterparts have gone to seed. They are

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difficult wines, traditionally made and often not approachable when young. But they offer clear evidence why Jensen deservedly won the 7,400-acre Mount Harlan appellation in 1990.

"When you drink wine that is 10 to 15 years old, my feeling is that the only one that can compete with the best Burgundies is Calera," says Jacques Seysses of Burgundy's Domaine Dujac, where Jensen once apprenticed. Jensen's efforts show the best of American winemaking. They are a reminder that the most extraordinary wines still come from a personal quest for perfection, a willingness to brush back skeptics and persevere in untested places. And so we are proud to name him the Chronicle's 2007 Winemaker of the Year.

Such quests require sacrifice, as Calera's three decades attest. While even pioneering vintners embrace the wine lifestyle over time, Jensen's

seven-tiered winery, with its sloped concrete retaining walls, is still very much the former rock-crushing plant it was when he bought it in 1977. The roof was completed in 1993, and the offices were little more than a construction trailer until 2001. The tasting room still doubles as a warehouse. But the unique gravity-flow facility preserves old-fashioned methods of minimal handling. It would be virtually impossible to build from scratch.

Jensen's winemaking is unrepentantly traditional. Most of his grapes are left on the cluster, with the stems adding structure to the wine. They are always punched down in small tanks to gently extract color and flavor. Then they typically spend 16 months in barrels before being bottled unfiltered. Wine from each vineyard site is made in a virtually identical manner, minimizing the winemaking artifice, exposing the parcel's individuality. Only native yeasts are allowed.

"That's how all the great wines of Burgundy are made," he says. "But the American educational establishment, Davis and so on, have always been very frightened, and tell them that terrible things will happen if they use indigenous yeasts."

There have been a few accommodations. A crusher-destemmer, something Jensen once called a "doomsday machine," now sits on the winery's top level. About half the fruit in his Central Coast Pinot Noir, which uses purchased

A patch of Burgundy in California

JENSEN

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grapes, is stripped from the stems, making it easier to drink young.

Nor does he conduct blind taste tests anymore between Calera wines and top Burgundies, tests his wines often won. It was expensive, and it was annoying his friends in France. "Maybe I had to go through all that to know that the point is not to be better than Musigny or Chambertin or Pommard," Jensen says, "but just for us to make the absolute best damn tasting wines we can from our plot of ground. That's the job."

Jensen, 63, grew up in Orinda, a dentist's son. His early ideas about wine came from his father's dentist pal George Selleck, a noted collector who counted wine researcher Maynard Amerine as a friend. By age 21, Jensen had tasted France's finest wines, including Burgundies from Richebourg and Romanee-Conti.

After getting a bachelor's degree from Yale, he headed to England for a master's in anthropology at Oxford. But increasingly he worried about life after school.

He decided to chase the one thing that truly captivated him. In 1970, the rangy 26-year-old crossed the English Channel and knocked on the door of Domaine de la Romanee-Conti, Burgundy's most famous producer, offering to help pick in the fields. But he also showed up early and stayed late to punch down the new wines by foot. The hardworking American found his endless questions answered willingly. "They liked the fact I would carry around a notebook and take notes," he says.

Andre Noblet, Romanee-Conti's cellar master, didn't speak English, so Jensen would translate for visitors. The young American got to taste with each group, observing how some of the world's most cherished wines evolved in the barrel. The following summer, Jensen returned to work with Seysses of newly founded Dujac.

Slowly a plan emerged. The hallowed east-facing slopes of the Cote d'Or were arrayed according to the layered ribbons of limestone soils, with the better vineyards stopping just short of the valley's alluvial plain. Jensen deduced that soils, specifically limestone, were the crucial factor. "Very few people in that era were buying land to plant grapes based on that," says Paul Draper, CEO of Ridge Vineyards.

In 1971, around Thanksgiving, he sailed back to New York, bought a Volkswagen camper and drove west, toting along five cases of 1966 Domaine de la Romanee-Conti.

There was just one problem: France is rife with limestone, but it's virtually nonexistent in California. Jensen pored over Bureau of Mines mineral surveys and topographical maps, searching for accessible deposits. There were lots of leads (though none in Napa or Sonoma counties, both devoid of calcareous soils) and once he found a promising site, he would drive out to survey it, dribbling drops of hydrochloric acid to see if it would react with alkaline chalk in the soil. If it did, he'd visit the county assessor and then talk to the owner. But no one wanted to sell. He helped fund his quest by reviewing restaurants for The Chronicle under a pseudonym.

At long last, he found a 324-acre parcel for sale high in the Gavilan range, a former quarry owned

by the S.H. Cowell Foundation, which managed the estate holdings of the heir to one of the West Coast's largest lime-mining fortunes.

In March 1974, Jensen closed on the property, bringing in his parents and a wealthy family friend as partners, paying \$18,500 - \$57 an acre - for raw land with no electricity and no legal access. (It would take eight years to get a proper easement.) The following month, he put his test vines in the ground and a year later planted the Jensen, Reed and Selleck vineyards.

Jensen wasn't actually first to find a limestone bounty in the Gavilans. Richard Graff of Chalone Vineyard was already growing low-yield Pinot Noir to the south, near Pinnacles National Monument, and Jensen often found himself over at Chalone, lending Graff a hand.

Jensen began planting his eponymous 13.8-acre vineyard with nursery vines, but he much preferred those at Chalone, which originally were sourced from top Burgundy plots, though Graff was dodgy about which. Jensen subsequently propagated cuttings from Chalone for his vineyards, then shared them with other winegrowers, giving rise to what is now called the Calera clone. "I just wanted to make sure that we got the real McCoy," he says.

As he waited for his vines to mature, Jensen made wine from 20 purchased tons of Zinfandel - wisely so, as a two-year drought hit, withering his baby plants. Not until 1978 did Jensen get his first Pinot crop, harvesting one meager ton from 24 acres and making wine with help from a newly hired winemaker, Steve Doerner. Even today, the 1978 Reed Vineyard Pinot Noir is a beast; inky, with a dark, beefy nose and still densely tannic, taking more than two hours to open up.

So there he was, with one barrel from each of his three vineyards. "I thought each one had a slightly different character, they had that complexity, those nuances that the greatest Pinot Noir can have, should have," he says. "So I was fired up."

Soon, the Mount Harlan wines were on the market for an eyebrow-raising \$18 - an audacious decision for a young vintner. So Jensen began making a Central Coast Pinot Noir, for around \$8, to help pay the bills.

He bought another 300 acres in 1982 and began planting Viognier, Chardonnay and what would become the Mills Vineyard. Indeed, Jensen's experience with Viognier preceded that of Pinot Noir - by two days. In 1970, while waiting to start at Romanee-Conti, he went south to Chateau Grillet, the tiny Rhone appellation, and put in two days work in exchange for three bottles of its famous Viognier-based wine.

Calera began to be noticed nationwide. The 1982 Jensen Vineyard won top honors at the National Restaurant Association's 1985 tasting in Chicago, beating out more than five dozen Pinot Noirs.

But the remote location and endless work were taking their toll. Jensen and his then wife had built a house at the winery in 1979, but two years later they, with daughter, Silvie, and son, Duggan, began splitting time between Hollister (San Benito County) and San Francisco. In 1986, they had a second daughter, Chloe, but by 1988 a divorce was imminent. To cap

it off, it was the midst of a five-year drought. Calera's vineyards yield 2 tons per acre in a good year, but that had dropped to a half-ton. "The vines looked like they were dying," Jensen says.

Jensen rebounded, with approval of the Mount Harlan appellation in 1990. He bought out his ex-wife and remaining partners. In 1997, he began planting again, including a 2,500-foot elevation plot in honor of his longtime vineyard manager, Jim Ryan. More recently, Calera became one of the few American wineries to grow Aligoté, the workhorse Burgundian grape, and to use glass stoppers instead of corks for some wines.

Yet Calera has always carried the burden of its location. Hollister is often thought to be near the hot Central Valley. In truth, Mount Harlan receives cool ocean influences from Monterey Bay. But it's a personal gripe for Jensen, who frequently cites weather data showing that Hollister has cooler average temperatures than Napa, St. Helena or even Healdsburg.

Then there's the winery property, which looks down on the central creeping portion of the San Andreas Fault. This usually means lots of little temblors rather than a big one, but among the early projects was to reinforce the retaining walls with massive grade beams secured 35 feet in the ground.

But the real problem is that Calera doesn't fit into any convenient mental wine map. No sooner had Jensen scored acclaim for his wines than critics began to proclaim more high-profile locales as hot spots for American Pinot. Carneros was first, then Oregon, Russian River Valley and so on. Hollister was nowhere to be found.

Though he had fulfilled his limestone dreams, Jensen was still falling prey to the whims of fashion, bypassed by trendier, more accessible locales and trendier styles of wine.

"I felt like I was Hercules, slaying these enemies," he says. "But they would spring back up out of the ground."

Looking increasingly like a weatherworn farmer, Jensen is still stoic these days but rather low-key, certainly given his outspoken reputation as a property-rights advocate and critic of government bureaucracy. (A recent winery newsletter spent three pages detailing his penalty for the late renewal of a shipping permit.) When the UPS driver arrives at day's end during a recent visit, Jensen helps load the truck.

He has ceded 75 percent ownership of the vineyards over to his three children. "I believe that's where the value is, and that's a completely different view from the Procter & Gamble view of wine," Jensen says. "In Burgundy, the dirt for the super-famous grand crus sells for \$2 million an acre or more. It doesn't matter where your winery is."

After so many years in the back of beyond, Josh Jensen has proven his point. His limestone quest yielded what can unequivocally be called one of California's grand crus.

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