

# Wine Spectator

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## Pinot Pioneer

Josh Jensen Made His Dreams of Burgundy Come True in California

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OCT. 15, 2013



## Josh Jensen: Pinot Pioneer

**I**t's a classic American story. A young man pursuing an impossible dream achieves his improbable success through talent and hard work. A pioneer becomes a leader and an inspiration to those who follow his path.

In Josh Jensen's case, the "impossible dream" was to make Burgundy-style Pinot Noirs in the remote and inhospitable mountains of central California. With little training or capital, he battled natural, cultural and economic obstacles to establish Calera, his winery and vineyards in the Gavilan Mountains near Monterey. After decades of struggle, Jensen has become one of the top Pinot producers in California.

Senior editor James Laube has been following Jensen's career, and tasting Calera's wines, since the 1980s. In his landmark book, *California Wine*, published in 1995, Laube describes Calera's Pinots as "dramatic and well-crafted, capable of aging," and gave the single-vineyard Jensen bottling five stars, his highest rating.

Now Laube revisits Calera to tell Jensen's story from the beginning, and it's a fascinating tale. Jensen is highly intelligent, deeply experienced, frequently witty and often downright ornery. The success of the California wine industry has depended on hardworking dreamers like Jensen, but their numbers are dwindling. Laube's story is a fitting tribute to an American original.

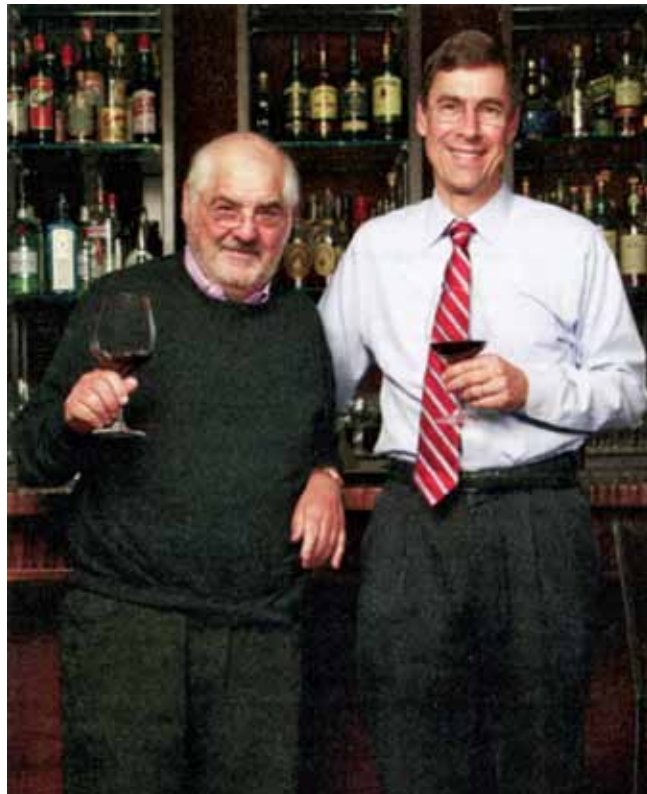
**C**alera has inspired many Pinot producers, and the grape is now making outstanding wines throughout the state. This issue also features our annual tasting report on California Pinot Noir.

The report's focus is the 2011 vintage, which proved challenging, Laube says. A series of October storms drenched the North Coast, resulting in wines that may be more pretty than powerful. Conditions were better in the Central Coast, however, and skilled winemakers made good wines in many areas of the state. Nearly 700 Pinots were tasted for this report, including many 2010s. Let Laube point you to the top bottlings and best values.

Our second major tasting report focuses on Spain, emphasizing the diversity and value that can be found across its many wine regions. From elegant Tempranillo-based reds in Rioja to fresh, minerally whites in Galicia, Spain has something to offer every palate and budget, with more than 1,000 wines reviewed overall.

For more vibrant, food-friendly whites, look to Friuli in north-eastern Italy. Senior editor Alison Napjus has reviewed more than 300 wines from this underappreciated region, and finds distinctive varietal bottlings and blends that depend more on terroir than oak for their character.

We are always on the lookout for great values. Managing editor Kim Marcus rounds up 100 wines from diverse regions around the world that earned very good to outstanding ratings (85 to 90 points on our 100-point scale) yet sell for \$15 or less. Most have



wide distribution, and should be relatively easy to find. They are perfect for big parties and weeknight dinners.

Chefs, like winemakers, often struggle for years to perfect their techniques and achieve their goals. Tom Colicchio began cooking for his family as a teenager; he now heads a far-flung operation that includes fine-dining restaurants across the United States and is a popular television host with his series *Top Chef*. Harvey Steiman offers an in-depth profile of a larger-than-life success story.

Whether you've dined at a Colicchio restaurant or enjoyed a Calera Pinot Noir—both of them experiences not to be missed—we hope you find this issue lively and helpful.

Marvin R. Shanken  
Editor and Publisher

Thomas Matthews  
Executive Editor



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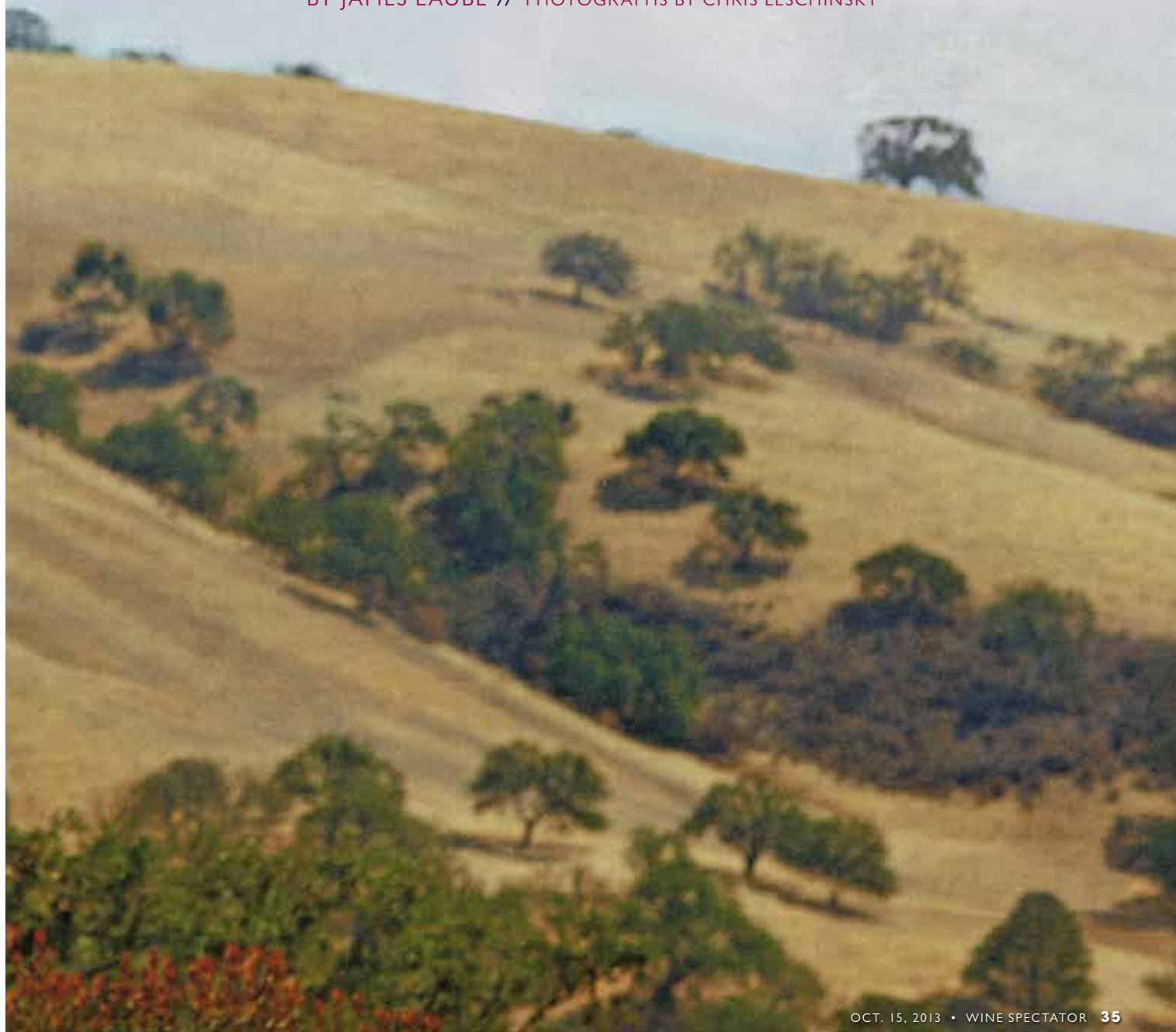
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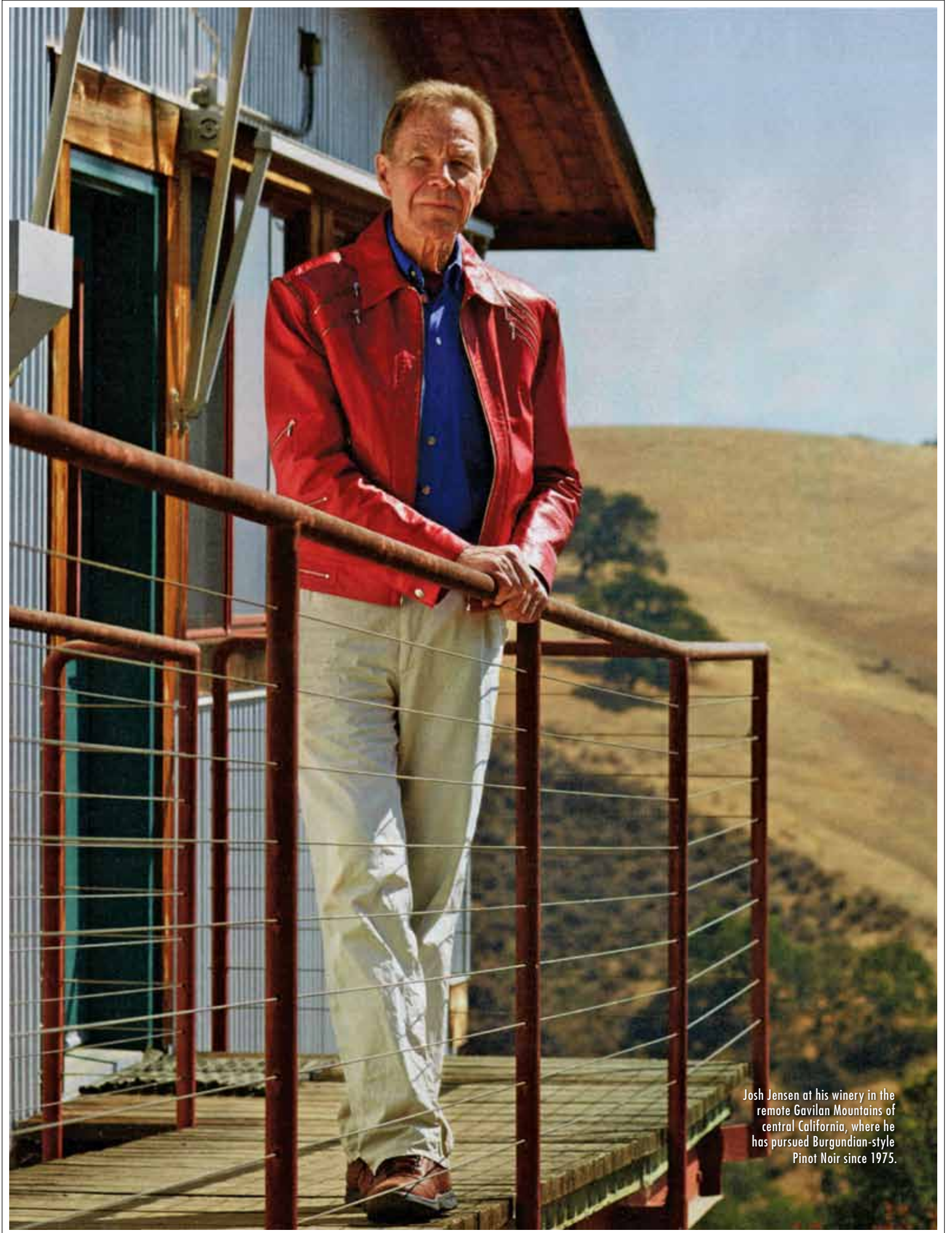
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Josh Jensen's passion for Pinot Noir and quest for California limestone led him to the hinterlands of Mount Harlan and the peaks of Calera

BY JAMES LAUBE // PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS LESCHINSKY





Josh Jensen at his winery in the remote Gavilan Mountains of central California, where he has pursued Burgundian-style Pinot Noir since 1975.

# JOSH JENSEN

was in his twenties, kicking around Europe, living the bohemian life. Well-educated but jobless, he lived off a small inheritance, crashing in dive hotels and mooching off friends. But when it came to food, Jensen lived life large, dining in the fanciest restaurants in France, usually by himself. You could do that in the 1960s for \$20, unless you wanted a good bottle of wine. Then the tab would be \$40.

Jensen always splurged for the wine. Another of his passions, rowing, had taken him from Yale to Oxford, where a deeper obsession took hold in an all-consuming way; it was there he became the ultimate wine geek, entranced by red Burgundy.

“I was one of those people even I would have hated to meet, because all I was able to talk about was wine,” recalls Jensen, 69. “Let me tell you about this other great bottle of wine, blah, blah, blah.’ I was an absolute pain-in-the-neck wine bore, a Johnny-one-note,” he adds, mocking himself in a slow drawl, sounding and looking a bit like George H.W. Bush.

Jensen never lost his unwavering fascination with Burgundy, but in an unlikely scenario he eventually found his own voice in the wine world. He settled in a desolate area of central California and succeeded in transplanting a Burgundian spirit into the limestone hills of Mount Harlan. Four decades later, his Pinot Noirs from the estate he calls Calera are among the most distinctive in California, admired far and wide for their deliberate style and authenticity. Jensen’s is a story of dedication and perseverance.

Getting there wasn’t easy. Jensen took a circuitous route. Frustrated by a self-confessed lack of ambition and direction, the young Jensen began drawing up a list of things he didn’t want to do, which he ticked off as if part of a rehearsed skit.

“I didn’t want to be a lawyer, I didn’t want to be a doctor, I didn’t want to have a hardware store, I didn’t want to be a stockbroker and I didn’t want to work in a bank,” he recounts, seated in his SUV on a warm day in June. As the list of undesirable



Jensen (right) with André Noblet, then cellar master of *Domaine de la Romanée-Conti*, in 1976. Jensen’s winemaking inspiration began while working at DRC.

professions grew, the light came on. “Why don’t I turn this question around,” he asked himself, “and do what I love, what turns me on? And the obvious answer was wine.”

In short order he decided to try his hand at vineyard work, to find out if he was up to the physical demands. One door he knocked on landed him a job as a harvest picker at the world’s most famous Pinot Noir estate, *Domaine de la Romanée-Conti* in the Côte d’Or. He worked in Burgundy again the next year, at *Domaine Dujac*. A stint at the Rhône Valley’s *Château-Grillet* rewarded him with payment in wine; his take for two days’ work was three bottles of the famed enclave’s mystifying *Condrieu*, a rich, exotic *Viognier*.

Jensen returned home to California with a purpose. He devised a plan to pursue Pinot Noir, beginning with an effort to replicate the terroir of Burgundy. He had become obsessed with not only the grape itself, but also with finding the kind of limestone escarpment that existed in the Côte d’Or. He had become convinced that limestone was essential to great Pinot Noir. But finding it in California wasn’t going to be easy.

When family and friends learned of his madcap idea, they were unanimous in their disbelief. Jensen appeared to them as star-struck and clueless—he had no winemaking or business experience, had never been a farmer, and had two degrees in liberal arts, one a master’s in social anthropology. His only qualifications, it seemed, were that he liked to drink Burgundy and that he had become pretty good at it.

“That’s the craziest idea,” a close friend offered, telling others, “He’s gonna lose his ass.” Which is nearly what happened.



**N**othing in Jensen's upbringing suggested he had any business pursuing wine. He was born in Seattle and reared in Orinda, Calif., across the bay from San Francisco. His father, Stephen, was a dentist; his mother, Jasmine, a homemaker. Wine was seldom in their home except on those special occasions when George Selleck, a dentist friend of his father's, visited. It was Selleck, a devout collector with a connoisseur's interest and a cellar to match, who introduced the adolescent Jensen to an amazing cross-section of magnificent wines. Jensen's was a first-class education in the classics, anchored by Bordeaux, Burgundy and California's elite.

"By the time I was 20, I had tasted all the great wines in the

world," Jensen recalls. At Yale, wine became more than a hobby; after Oxford, Jensen had become obsessed.

Pinot Noir is often the wine that hooks people the hardest. The fact that it's difficult to grow isn't much of a consideration early on. It's the mystique of the grape—along with its variability—that sets fantasies in motion. People can't seem to be able to drink or even find enough of the good stuff, and those who become truly fascinated with it often pursue it with single-minded vigor.

"My first love and still my greatest love is of white Burgundies and red Burgundies," says Jensen. "I just love the complexity."

Working two harvests in Burgundy, the 20-something Jensen became convinced that crumbling, decomposed rock was key to

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**"Here I am with thin soils, in the hills, not much nutrient matter, no water, so you know you're going to get low yields. But I also knew I had a chance for the wines to be really special."**

*—JOSH JENSEN*

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**Left:** Cooling summer breezes and fog from the Pacific moderate the climate at the Mount Harlan vineyards, allowing Pinot Noir to thrive. **Above:** Limestone is a key component of Calera's *terroir*.

Pinot's success. "All the winemakers I was privileged to meet all said, 'Kid, when you get back to California, make sure you find limestone,'" recalls Jensen.

Limestone, he insists, is one factor that gives great red Burgundies their finesse and ageability. That and low yields. Jensen learned in Burgundy that *terroir* is more about soil than sun.

Once back in California, he began his search for the perfect property. There isn't much limestone in California to begin with, but Jensen's fortunes changed when he discovered an old geological mapping of the state that identified all the potential commercial mineral deposits.

"It was very easy to look for the gray blobs that had 'LS' written on them," he explains, "and you're going to find them in really rugged soils."

First he looked in Napa. Zero. Then Sonoma. Zero. Finally, two-and-a-half years later, he found what he was looking for in the parched, rolling hills of San Benito County.

"I remember Josh poring over geological maps in 1972, looking for limestone veins," says Jacques Seysses, of Domaine Dujac. "He found some, and he spent several years in what seemed to me to

be the middle of nowhere, in a trailer with a wife and small child. I thought that here was a certain sacrifice being made for *terroir*."

While no one thought much of Jensen's vision, he was stubborn and determined, willing to risk all he had to pursue his dream. Whenever he ran into an obstacle—and there were many—he persisted. The first property he bought, in 1975, cost \$18,500 and totaled 320 acres. It had no

paved roads, electricity or phone lines. And practically no water. He has been forced to water parched vines by hand and has fought wildfires at the edge of a vineyard on numerous occasions. But, he says, "I have not yet killed myself with all this crazy shit."

Rainfall in Hollister, Calif., in San Benito County, averages 14 inches annually, which is half or less than half of what Napa and Sonoma receive. As such, the vines at Calera are spare, yielding only 1 to 2 tons an acre in the best years. There's no such thing as overcropping there; nature does the pruning. Jensen's second 320-acre parcel, bought in 1982, cost \$150,000, but had more plantable acreage, along with a water source, two big pluses.

In addition to nature's challenges, California wine culture also proved an obstacle. Most vintners in the 1970s took a dim view of Pinot Noir's future in the state's winescape. Pinots of the time, coarse, with muddled flavors, were grown in the wrong areas, usually too warm, with inferior clones. Compounding the problem, most were made like Cabernet, right down to the rustic tannins.

The consensus among experts was that most of California was too hot for Pinot to thrive and that Jensen was far too naive. Even his wife, Jeanne, grew weary of his fantasy and of living in a trailer on their property, which they did for years. (They later divorced, with Jensen eventually buying out her share.) That Jensen could beat the odds and make elegant, graceful, Burgundy-inspired Pinots seemed a long shot at best.

"At the time, it was the accepted wisdom of wine writers that [California] Pinot Noir was not good and never would be any good, and I decided to prove them wrong," says Jensen. "I knew I was taking a gamble. If [the vineyard] didn't work, no one would buy it. Here I am with thin soils, in the hills, not much nutrient matter, no water, so you know you're going to get low yields. But I also knew I had a chance for the wines to be really special."

Jensen had a good reason to believe in his vision: Chalone. In the same mountain range, just 15 miles to the south of Jensen's site, Richard Graff, another Burgundy fanatic and limestone votary, had rejuvenated a neglected vineyard planted in the early 1900s by a Frenchman named Tamm, who liked the limestone soils because they reminded him of Champagne. Graff made experimental wines from the property, including a sparkling wine, before buying it in 1965 and naming it after a local Native American tribe. As Graff's vineyard returned to health, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc were planted. With the 1969 vintage, released in

the early 1970s, people began to take notice of the wines' exceptional quality. Chalone offered proof that the Gavilan Mountains were a good fit for Burgundian varietals.

Over time, Jensen and Graff became close. Jensen used rootstock from Chalone, likely brought from Burgundy, for his vineyard, and he rented space there before building his own winery. Some saw misery loving company. But Graff and Jensen were united in their passion for the region's terroir.

**B**y 1975, Jensen had pushed forward and made an offer on the former limestone quarry that would become his first vineyard parcel. He rented a tractor and cleared and planted an acre to 500 vines even before the sale closed escrow. He named the property Calera, Spanish for limekiln.

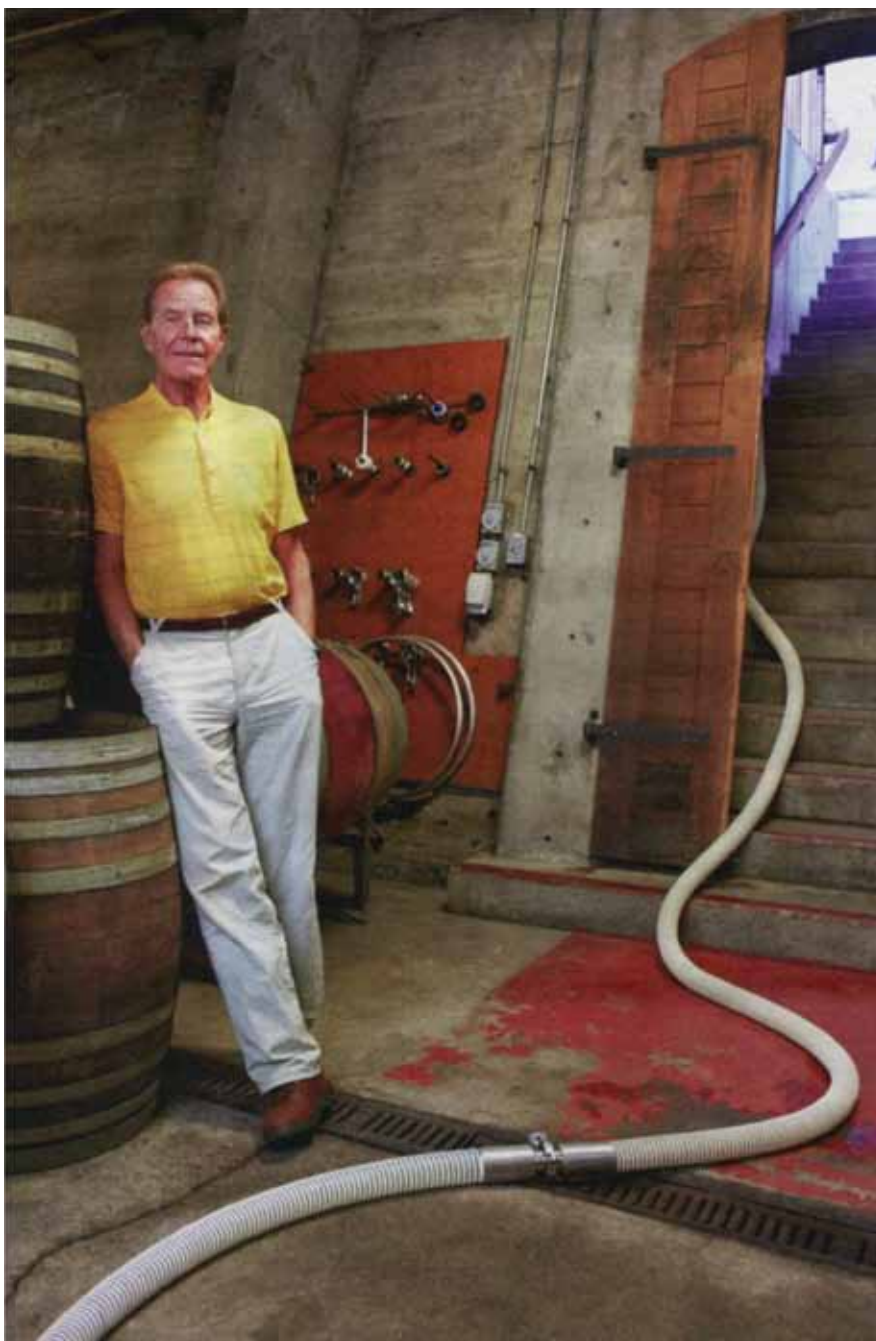
He initially carved out three vineyards, and then added five more from the 3 million tons of limestone beneath his dusty boots. He planted mostly Pinot Noir, but also Chardonnay and Viognier, making him among the first to plant the latter white grape in California. He developed his vineyard on the steepest inclines—uneven, rolling slopes that reach as high as 2,500 feet, stopping only when his tractor couldn't climb any higher. Nowhere is his property flat or uniform.

Jensen made his first wine—a Zinfandel from purchased grapes—that same year, largely to practice winemaking and to generate cash flow. It sold briskly. He made his first Pinots, a barrel each from the Jensen, Reed and Selleck vineyards, in 1978, just three years after they were planted. In order to satisfy demand, he bottled all the wines in 375ml format, selling them for \$18 each.

Customers complained that there wasn't enough of it, and that it was too expensive, so the next year Jensen bought Pinot from Santa Barbara and introduced the Central Coast Pinot, solving both concerns.

In the decades since, Jensen has stuck to his guns. He has never deviated from his style, even as Pinot Noir grown elsewhere has gained in quantity and popularity, with riper, fleshier and richer versions being made throughout the state.

Calera's Pinots are uniformly delicate, with snappy acidity, medium weight, medium color, vivid berry flavors and limestone-mineral and subtle herb shadings. Neither flashy nor cloaked in oak, they are made to cellar, and in a world where wines are crafted for immediate gratification and consumption, Calera's stand out for their austerity and minerality, reflecting the fulfillment of Jensen's vision of rooting Pinot Noir in limestone. (For more on the vineyards, see "Understanding Calera Pinots," page 47.)



Jensen's bottlings from Mount Harlan include six single-vineyard Pinot Noirs, along with Chardonnay and Viognier. In addition, he makes three Central Coast blends of Pinot, Chardonnay and Viognier from multiple vineyard sources.

**C**alera lies in a rugged region of central California's rural and little-known San Benito County known as Mount Harlan. The Gavilan Mountains are an interior coastal range most famous as a backdrop for the works of John Steinbeck, including *Of Mice and Men*.

The winery is located 10 miles south of Hollister (population approximately 35,000), a flat, windswept agricultural hub midway along the 810-mile-long San Andreas Fault. Running the length of California, the fault is famous for seismic activity and daily rumblings. Most of the time, the shifts are so minor and so deep underground that no one feels them. But occasionally the temblors unleash their power with a vengeance, including the famous earthquakes of 1906 and 1989. Much studied by geologists, the limestone



of Mount Harlan, formed by skeletal fragments of marine organisms such as coral and foraminifera on an ancient ocean floor, is the result of millions of years of uplifting and shifting plates.

By comparison, not far from the austere soils of Calera is Salinas Valley in Monterey County, once called “the Salad Bowl of the World.” It is a fertile region, one of California’s largest wine grape producing areas (and home to many excellent wines from the Santa Lucia Highlands appellation). It also supports a wide range of row crops, from root vegetables to fruit trees.

Mount Harlan, on the other hand, along with its seismic upheavals and rugged rock outcroppings, sits in a gap that’s due east from Monterey Bay. Almost without fail, hot inland temperatures create a funnel effect, pulling chilly Pacific air eastward.

Just thinking about this gasping landscape can make one thirsty. The frequent years of drought are the most troubling; though averages round out the lows and highs, water is scarce more often than not. Jensen knew from the outset that water would be a big issue, but it’s far worse than he expected.

“It’s a two-edged sword,” he says of the barren climate. “Often, our longest-lived wines came from drought years.” But then he vents. “It’s a very painful situation. This 2013 is another drought year. The darn lack of water is just getting worse with global warming. In my opinion, it’s just gonna get worse and worse.”

While the terroir dictates style, with the meager limestone soils and arid climate restricting vine vigor and crop load, the winemaking is minimalist as well. All of the Pinot Noirs are made identically: Each is 100 percent whole-cluster fermented to capture the grape’s vibrancy; each is 100 percent fermented with native yeasts; each is fermented with its stems (except de Villiers, which is the most tannic and doesn’t need further extraction). The wines are aged in François Frères oak for 16 months before being bottled unfiltered.

Perhaps this minimalist approach owes something to Jensen’s lack of formal training; at any rate, he has hired winemakers who were also beginners. Sara Steiner, who worked at Calera from 1992 to 1996, had never made Pinot before; Steve Doerner, winemaker from 1979 to 1991, had never made wine, period. However, present winemaker Mike Waller, 38, is a viticulture and enology grad from the University of California, Davis, who worked for Pinot-centric wineries David Bruce, Saintsbury, Beaulieu and Chalone before joining Calera eight years ago.

The winery was adapted from a multilevel rock-crushing facility that had been built into the steep hillside in the 1950s. The facility was abandoned before it was ever used, but 20 years later the walls and terraces, with some substantial seismic retrofitting, became the heart of Calera’s winery. After decades of improvements and construction, the seven-tier, gravity-flow winery is designed for optimal efficiency in handling grapes, juice and wine.

Today Calera produces 35,000 cases of wine annually. About 7,000 cases come from the Mount Harlan estate, most of it Pinot Noir. The lion’s share, however, comprises Jensen’s three Central Coast bottlings: a Pinot Noir, a Chardonnay and a Viognier.

The Chardonnay and Pinot are blends from a dozen vineyards spread from Santa Barbara to Monterey, including big names such as Talley and Laetitia in San Luis Obispo, Los Alamos in Santa Barbara, and Sleepy Hollow and Doctor’s Vineyard in Monterey. Most of the grapes are sourced from the same vineyards each year

and are made in a similar way to the Mount Harlan wines (except that the Central Coast Pinots are fermented with fewer stems and receive less new oak and time in barrel than the Mount Harlan wines). All three bottlings are often of very high quality and, at around \$35, are exceptional values.



Calera's winery, a gravity-flow operation encompassing seven levels, occupies the site of a former rock-crushing facility. “Calera” comes from the Spanish word for limekiln.



Mike Waller has been in charge of Calera's cellar for the past eight years. He makes the wines in minimalist fashion utilizing whole-cluster fermentation and native yeasts.

## “If grape varieties were students, Pinot Noir would be in the alternative school and Josh would be the headmaster.”

—MICHAEL SILACCI, WINEMAKER, OPUS ONE

**M**ichael Silacci might seem an unlikely candidate to be a regular visitor to Calera. He is the winemaker at Opus One in Napa Valley, a winery with close ties to Bordeaux (it's half-owned by Château Mouton-Rothschild) and none to Burgundy. Cabernet and Pinot Noir have little in common besides their red color and pedigree status.

But Silacci, 60, makes a regular pilgrimage to Mount Harlan with his winemaking team to better understand viticulture, and Pinot Noir is the best teacher. He has visited Calera more times than he has any other winery except Mouton.

“In order to make a great Cabernet you have to understand how to make Pinot Noir,” says Silacci. “Pinot Noir is perhaps the most difficult grape from which to make wine. It's very different [from Cabernet]; the less you touch it, the better it will often be.”

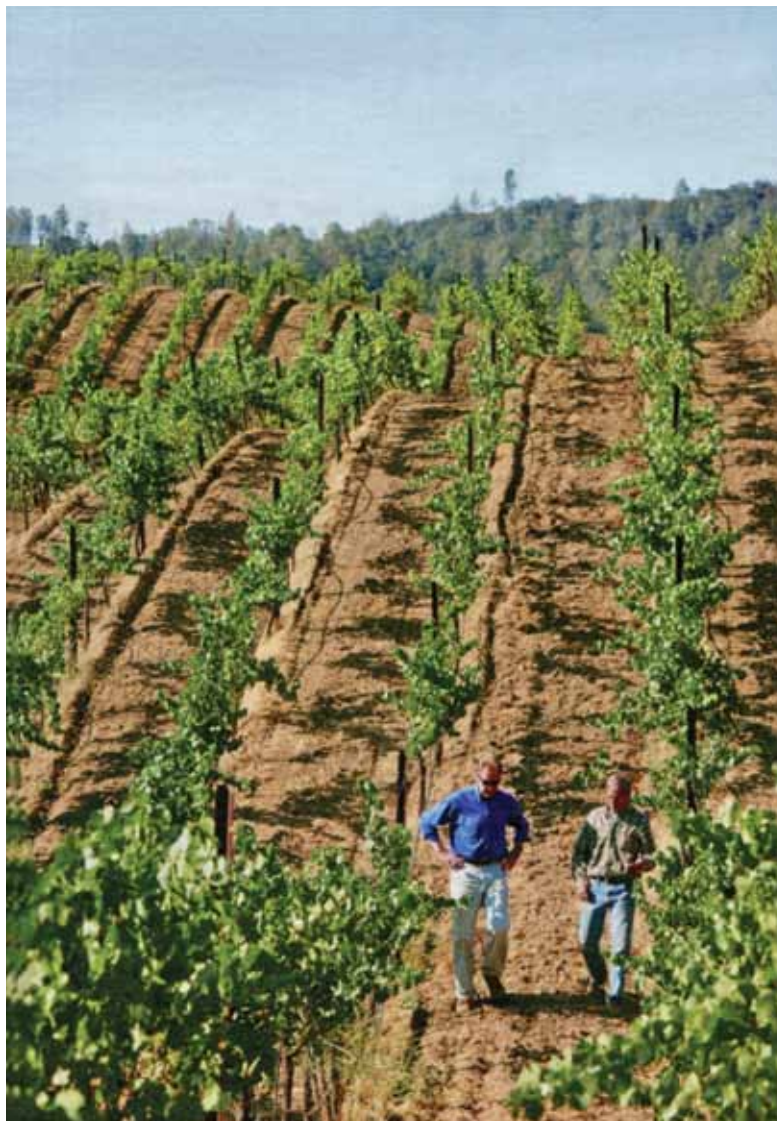
Then he adds drolly, “If grape varieties were students, Pinot Noir would be in the alternative school and Josh would be the headmaster.”

Despite Jensen's success, as well as the availability of limestone-laced land nearby, Calera remains in its own orbit, with no nearby vineyards, which doesn't escape Jensen. He is widely admired, but has hardly been a Pied Piper. “No one's even actually ever asked me if there are any good sites around here with limestone on them,” he says.

Yet there are such sites, and land prices in San Benito County are still affordable; 90 percent is grazing land. Jensen would welcome company. But most vintners, he believes, seek wine-country glamour, and so plant vines and build wineries where their friends are and where there's a culture of first-class restaurants. Having six or eight other wineries making Pinot Noir from Mount Harlan would give Calera a greater presence and a better way to measure its quality. As it is, there are no other benchmarks.

It's been a long road to walk alone. It took Calera 12 years to turn a profit, Jensen says, admitting he's never really been “a money guy” or businessman. “I never had any idea until income tax time to find out if I had a profitable year,” he says. “It's very disappointing never making a profit. It wears you down.”

But not out. Despite its location and all the early skepticism, Calera has turned into a financial success (selling up to 40 percent of its wine in Japan), and Jensen remains its sole owner. While his adult children own the land the vineyards are planted on, which he gifted to them, and they occasionally represent Calera at wine events, they are not directly involved in the wine business. Yet



Jensen (left) with vineyard manager Jim Ryan among Calera's vines. Though it's been a long road to success for the winery, today its Pinot Noirs stand as singular expressions of the grape in California.

when asked what has been the biggest challenge, Jensen doesn't mention his remote location or the solitary nature of his pursuit: “The hardest part is selling.” He still has a hard time promoting his wines, encouraging people to buy. “My mother said, ‘Don't brag, don't brag. Don't brag about yourself.’”

Jensen still isn't bragging, but his wines have spoken with a singular purpose. “He's very determined,” says winemaker Waller, who came to Calera to escape the corporate wine world. “He put all his marbles in one basket planting on untouched terrain. I wanted to end up at a winery that focused on the product and not the bottom line.”

Jensen's vision became a reality. And the dream lives on.

# UNDERSTANDING CALERA PINOTS: FROM VINEYARD TO BOTTLE



Josh Jensen's Calera Pinot Noirs share the reserve, subtlety and limestone minerality found in many iconic red Burgundies. In that regard, they stand apart in California, as Jensen did when he homed in on what he thought would be an ideal location for growing Pinot.

"I have tasted a number of Caleras over the years, and I think they prove that limestone is important," says Jacques Seysses, of Domaine Dujac. "To me they are the most Burgundian of Californian Pinots, and the ones I have tasted that really age well."

What unites Jensen's half-dozen vineyards is the dirt: All have limestone soils. What distinguishes them, and the wines they make, is the individual topography of the sites; though most of the six lie in close proximity one to the next, typically within a hundred yards or less of one another, they are markedly different in terms of elevation and exposure.

The winemaking is essentially the same for each vineyard, and the wines each spend about 16 months in new François Frères oak barrels. Jensen never mentions DRC after retelling his work experience there, but clearly that's the model, and with his six Pinot vineyards, the parallels exist. All the wines are ageworthy (Jensen encourages holding them for 12 to 20 years) and aim for the purest expression of their sites.

When I toured Calera in June, Jensen poured each of his 2010 bottlings in the vineyard where it is grown. It was the perfect way to put the wines together with their sites and to contemplate the different terroirs. (The scores, however, represent formal blind tastings conducted in our California office.)

All six of the Pinot Noir vineyards bear the last names of important people in Jensen's life.

**JENSEN** 13.8 acres; planted in 1975; named after Josh's father. Offers the most expansive fruitiness, with floral perfumed aromas. The 2010 is firm and aromatic.

**REED** 4.4 acres; planted in 1975; refers to William Reed, an early investor in Calera. The lightest of the Calera Pinots in color and weight. Trim and spicy, the 2010 shows cranberry and sour cherry flavors.

**SELLECK** 4.8 acres; planted in 1975; honors mentor George Selleck. A sleek, restrained wine, exhibiting an earthy limestone character. The 2010 ends with a mix of wild raspberry, red candy and pomegranate flavors.

**DE VILLIERS** 14.6 acres; planted in 1982; a nod to Marq de Villiers, author of *The Heartbreak Grape*, chronicling Jensen and Calera. Lightly fragrant, with violet and red candy notes, the 2010 is elegant.

**MILLS** 14.4 acre; planted in 1982; so designated for neighbor Everett Mills, a close friend. Displays an exuberant fruitiness and a stewy plum Pinot flavor. The 2010 is firm, dark and intense.

**RYAN** approximately 14 acres across two sites; planted in 1982; carries the name of vineyard manager Jim Ryan. Featuring ripe plum and cherry flavors, the 2010 shows a loamy mineral edge.

Note: There are also small vineyards devoted to Viognier (about 5 acres) and Chardonnay (6 acres), plus a few rows of Aligoté. —J.L.