

WINERY PROFILE

Calera: A Passion for Pay Dirt

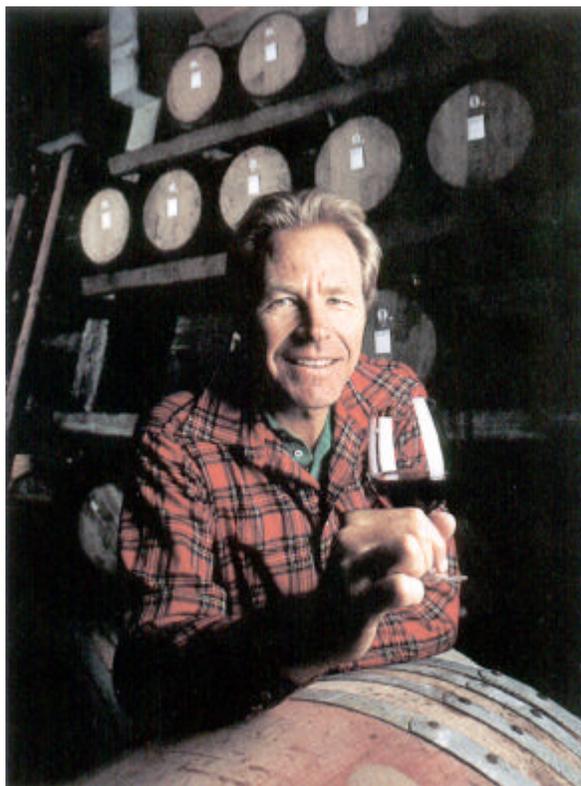
BY CHRISTOPHER WEIR

JOSH JENSEN PEERS ACROSS THE vast horizon that unfolds beyond his Hollister winery. “That range,” he says, pointing toward the distant Diablo Mountains, “is the dividing line between the hot inland valley and the coastal-influenced climates. Still, a lot of people think Hollister is really hot, that it’s in the San Joaquin Valley. I’ve penned a little tirade about this for my next newsletter.”

Obviously, Josh is a little behind the wine industry curve when it comes to promoting the climate that influences his vineyards. Yet in a strange way it makes sense, because for more than 20 years his Calera Wine Company has been ahead of the curve on everything from vineyard siting to winemaking techniques. And if you ask him what’s most responsible for the signature complexity of his wines, you won’t hear the standard line about morning fog and long growing seasons. “It’s the soil,” he says. “No question.”

Indeed, the limestone soil that underlies Calera’s vineyards is the moral to an intriguing story that begins in 1970, when Josh—a graduate of both Yale and Oxford—toured Europe and found his way to Burgundy. There, after working two consecutive harvests—one for *Domaine de la Romanée-Conti*, the other at *Domaine Dujac*—his love for wine transformed into a personal quest: to return to his native California and make Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays that would aspire to the quality of the ones he’d helped produce in France.

Thus began an adventure that sent



Josh Jensen of Calera Wine Company

him and his Volkswagen past established wine regions and across the state searching for available property that possessed his personal pot of gold: continuous limestone deposits.

Explaining this singular soil obsession, Josh refers to his Burgundy experience, noting that the most hallowed wines of that region are produced on a narrow, limestone-rich slope called the *Côte d’Or*. “To me, that said the soil on the flanks of that limestone ridge accounts for everything.”

He adds: “The UC Davis textbooks I’d seen said the most important thing was climate. Second was grape variety. The skills of the winemaker were third. And then, maybe fourth, soil. My

approach was very different. It was to find limestone, then worry about whether or not it was too hot or too cold.”

Eventually, with the help of a California Division of Mines and Geology report, he hit pay dirt: a remote mosaic of limestone-rich slopes in the northern Gavilan Mountains outside Hollister. There, in 1975, he planted three separate vineyards to Pinot Noir under the Mount Harlan designation: the 14-acre Jensen Vineyard, and two 5-acre vineyards, Reed and Selleck. Nine years later, he planted the 12-acre Mills Vineyard, as well as a 6-acre Chardonnay block. And in 1983, he was one of the first California vintners to plant Viognier, a varietal that today finds itself as the hottest new thing in white wine.

Josh’s Viognier inspiration also dates back to his French sojourn, when he spent two days hauling grapes down steep slopes for the Rhone Valley’s *Chateau Grillet*, a premier Viognier producer. “I took my pay in wine,” Josh laughs. “I got three bottles for the two days.”

In 1977, Josh purchased another, more “civilized” parcel about five miles from—and 1,000 feet lower than—the vineyards. There, he began construction on a production facility. Christened Calera (Spanish for “lime kiln,” a motif inspired by the 19th-century kiln that adorns the vineyard property) and anchored at the top by the massive concrete wall of an abandoned rock-crushing operation, the winery was built on six levels, making it California’s first gravity-flow cellar.

The gravity-flow design was just one of several winemaking techniques that aligned Calera with traditional Burgundian methods. Ironically, these techniques also placed the winery at the cutting edge of West Coast Pinot Noir production. Gravity-flow cellars, natural yeast and whole-cluster fermentations, unfiltered wines: These are all long-standing Calera winemaking methods that are today being celebrated as unique by dozens of wineries. As Josh tells it, however, he wasn't concerned with being a visionary, but rather with establishing a hands-off winemaking approach that he knew would preserve and emphasize the flavor nuances of the notoriously delicate Pinot Noir grape.

"We get better flavors without grinding and chopping the fruit in a crusher," he says, explaining why crushers are nonexistent and pumps rarely used at Calera. "Also, we minimize racking (pumping wine from one container to another) because every time you rack, you lose body and color."

Thus, Calera's Pinot Noirs simply flow from one winemaking step to the

next, ultimately finding their way into French oak barrels at the cellar's lower tiers. After aging, they are racked into stainless steel tanks prior to bottling, then fined with egg whites to precipitate excess solids. This is about as direct from vine to bottle as it gets, and the results are unmistakably expressed in the level of complexity for which Calera's Pinot Noirs are heralded.

A taste of the 1993 Calera Selleck reveals a gorgeously textured wine, perfumed with dense, earthy accents and exhibiting a sleek tapestry of spicy, floral fruit nuances. The previous Selleck vintage earned a platinum medal at the 1996 World Wine Championships and was named the national champion amid a field of 189 American Pinot Noirs. The

Reed, Jensen and Mills vineyard-designated Pinot Noirs are also highly acclaimed, and Calera's Central Coast Pinot Noir, produced from purchased grapes, is



California's first gravity-flow cellar at Calera

noted for its value-priced excellence.

As for Calera's Viognier and Chardonnay production, whole clusters are loaded directly into the press and dejuiced during a long, gentle cycle. The juice flows from the press to a holding tank for settling, from where it's sent to French oak barrels for fermentation. The impetus behind the labor-intensive barrel fermentations, Josh explains, goes beyond any subtle oak flavors that may influence the wine. "There's a big difference between the same wine fermented in a really old oak barrel and fermented in a stainless steel tank. The tank-fermented one has a real fruity, grape-juice character. The other has a rich, rounded and gutsy character."

Nevertheless, he reminds, the definitive aspect of Calera's wines is bequeathed by the earth beneath its vineyards. So what, after all, is so special about limestone? "I see it in terms of complexity. I want my wines to have a lot of layers, dimensions and nuances. Somehow, some way, and for some reason, limestone soils add complexity to the grapes and therefore the wine."

He laughs, then defers to the mysteries that are behind all great wines: "Just how the soil does it," he smiles, "I don't know." ♦

As Seen In
Adventures in Dining