

## STEVEN SPURRIER

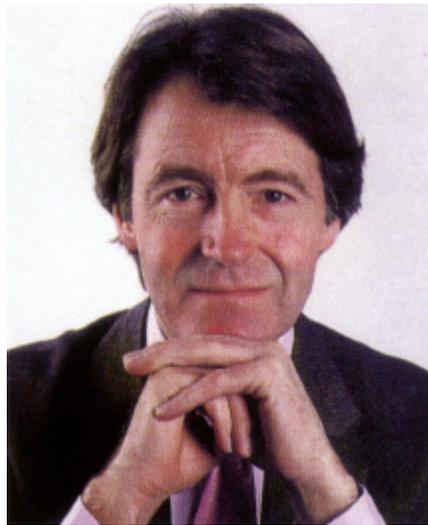
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## Pinot Noir? Limestone first, then commitment

For many wine lovers, from both sides of the Atlantic and even further afield, Josh Jensen, the 54-year old founder and now sole-owner of Calera Vineyards 100 miles south of San Francisco, makes the best Pinot Noirs outside the Côte d'Or. Jensen agrees with them, admitting that: 'I like our Pinot Noirs more than anybody else's in California. We're quite different from the currently fashionable wines from the Russian River and Carneros, which are enjoyable wines, but they don't possess the long-term ageing potential that requires a skeleton, the tannic backbone from low-yielding vines. The most sought-after Pinots in the US are those where the fruit jumps out of the glass – no question, these taste much better at two or three years old than one of my wines, but I would be quite happy to have my wines compared to any Pinot Noirs from anywhere at six, eight, 10, 12 or 14 years old, and I suspect that the fruity wines will be showing less and less well, while ours are just getting going. The 1994s are still babies, just starting to peek out of their shell, but totally immature. I feel that my wines require an intellectual commitment to see what they will become.'

The idea that fine wines carry a message that needs to be understood to fully appreciate them sounds elitist, yet it recognises what used quite openly to be described as 'breed'. Breed does not happen by chance and it cannot be created in the cellar. Breed comes from planting noble grape varieties on soil that suits them, and respecting time-honoured traditions in viticulture, vinification and ageing. This belief allowed Dr Remington Norman, on the presentation of his inaugural paper to L'Academie Internationale du Vin in Geneva in 1997, to suggest that perhaps the world's finest vineyard has yet to be discovered, on a hillside somewhere far away from Europe, whose own vineyards have shown those interested what to look for.

Having gone from Yale to Oxford in 1967 (where his Eight beat Cambridge by two and a half lengths), Jensen, inspired by Hugh Johnson's Wine and unwilling to follow his contemporaries into banking, medicine or the law, found himself in 1970 picking grapes at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC). The following year he returned to Burgundy to help Jacques Seysses make the wines at Domaine Dujac, concluding that nothing but the soil could logically explain the quality changes from villages wine through premier cru to grand cru, and that the key was limestone. Back in his native California, armed with hundreds of maps from the Bureau of Mines, it was two years before he located the continuous limestone deposits 2,200 feet above sea level on Mount Harlan in the Gavilan Mountains, east of Monterey County. The nearest winery, then and now, was Chalone, 18 miles to the south. The land, with no water




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and no legal access, was owned by the successors to a long-defunct limestone company. In 1975, Jensen bought 120 hectares (ha) and planted 10 of them to Pinot Noir. In 1982, he bought a further 120ha and planted 10 with more Pinot Noir and Chardonnay and Viognier, and last year these grapes were extended over a further five hectares.

The rule of thumb in California is that you will lose money on a vineyard for 10 years before you see a profit. Jensen lost money for 12 years, meeting the white wine boom of the 1970s head-on with his quirky reds, and although he admits that making Zinfandel from bought-in grapes was a mistake, he derives satisfaction from the fact that, out of all the wineries in the state producing solely red wine, only Diamond Creek, Ridge and Calera made it into the 1980s. Nonetheless, the severely restricted yields from the Calera vineyards, never more than five tons/ha (equal to the 30hl/ha that DRC judges to be the correct maximum for a grand cru Burgundy) and often less, persuaded Jensen to create his Central Coast range: Pinot Noir in 1980 and Chardonnay in 1982. Even in the exceptionally prolific 1997 vintage the Calera Pinots averaged only 6.5 tons/ha.

Aubert de Villaine described his technique at DRC as 'harvesting very ripe grapes and then doing as little as possible'. Jensen applauds this approach, but thinks that to describe it as 'non-interventionist', to go with non-fining and non-filtration, is misleading. He follows the advice of DRC's great André Noblet that 'there are things you have to do, things you do not do and things you sometimes do'. To do what needs to be done, he designed what he thinks is the only 100% gravity flow winery in the world. Built into the side of the mountain on six floors, with a seventh under construction for extra storage, the wine is never pushed around, from the whole-cluster fermentation, to barrels and finally to bottle. The vineyard-designated wines, Jensen, Reed, Selleck and the more recently planted Mills, certainly repay such treatment by expressing, year after year, their unique differences of soil.

Josh Jensen proclaims himself happy with his Burgundian terroir and with the California wines that come from it. And in case this ex-oarsman doesn't keep fit enough running up and down the stairs of his winery, he has his yearly bicycling jaunts in France, where he is a member of the exclusive PDG club (Pedaler dans la Gastronomie), founded with his Burgundian friends Jacques Seysses, Patrick Bize, Jean-Pierre de Smet and Alain Graillet.

*Calera wines are distributed by Bibendum, Tel: 0171 916 7706.*

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