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WINE TALK

Frank J. Priol

Shadow Boxing With Burgundy

AMERICAN winemakers still hold tastings in which they pit their wines against the best of France or Italy. If these upstarts outscore the foreigners, it's a glorious victory. But winning isn't necessary.

Simply being able to boast that "we went up against the Pétrus or the Richebourg and did O.K." establishes a relationship, however tenuous.

It's called positioning, and has long been known in the auto industry — when, say, the maker of a clunker says it has more trunk room than a Bentley.

Such were my thoughts last Wednesday, when Josh Jensen, the founder and owner of Calera, a California winery specializing in pinot noir, offered to organize a blind tasting, pitting eight of his pinots noirs and one chardonnay against formidable foreign competition — all French, as it turned out.

But Mr. Jensen has no need for positioning. His little winery has long been considered a reliable source of fine Burgundy-style pinot noir. James Halliday, in his *Wine Atlas of California* (Viking, 1993), called Mr. Jensen the state's "high priest of pinot noir."

Mr. Jensen started Calera, which means lime kiln in Spanish, in 1975 after Yale, Oxford and apprenticeships in Burgundy and the Rhone Valley.

The winery and some 50 acres of vineyards are on limestone outcroppings in the remote Gavilan Mountains in San Benito County, two hours south of San Francisco.

There are four single-vineyard pinots — Reed, Mills, Selleck and Jensen — along with chardonnay and viognier, all in the Mount Harlan viticultural region. There is also less expensive generic chardonnay and pinot noir from purchased grapes to help pay the bills.

To a degree, the tasting was sure to preach to the converted. Calera's reputation is sound. But I had not tried the wines in a while, and I knew Mr. Jensen would provide challenging competitors.

So, with a few misgivings, I accepted. For support, moral and technical, I asked others to join in: Daniel Johannes, the wine director at the restaurant Montrachet and a Burgundy importer; David Gordon, the

wine director at TriBeCa Grill; Lettie Teague, the wine editor of *Food & Wine Magazine*; and Eric Asimov, a colleague from *The New York Times*.

We met Mr. Jensen in the morning at TriBeCa Grill in Manhattan, where he had set up his wines in six groups, or flights. Only he knew the names and the vintages. The first group was made up of chardonnays, the rest pinots noirs. These were the wines and vintages, listed in the order in which we rated them in each group:

- Chardonnays, 1996: Mount Harlan Chardonnay, Calera, and Montrachet Grand Cru, Domaine Morey-Blanc (tied for first); Chassagne-Montrachet, Domaine Michel Neillon.

- Pinots Noirs, 1997: Mills Vineyard Pinot Noir, Calera; Musigny, Cuvée Vieilles Vignes, Comte de Vogüé; Reed Vineyard Pinot Noir, Calera; Richebourg, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

- Pinots Noirs, 1990: Nuits-St.-Georges aux Lavières, Domaine Leroy, and Mills Vineyard Pinot Noir, Calera (tied for first); Musigny, Cuvée Vieilles Vignes, Comte de Vogüé.

- Pinots Noirs, 1985: Échezeaux, Domaine Mongeard-Mugneret; Selleck Vineyard Pinot Noir, Calera; Mazis-Chambertin, Domaine Maume; Reed Vineyard Pinot Noir, Calera; Clos de la Roche, Domaine Pierre Amiot & Fils.

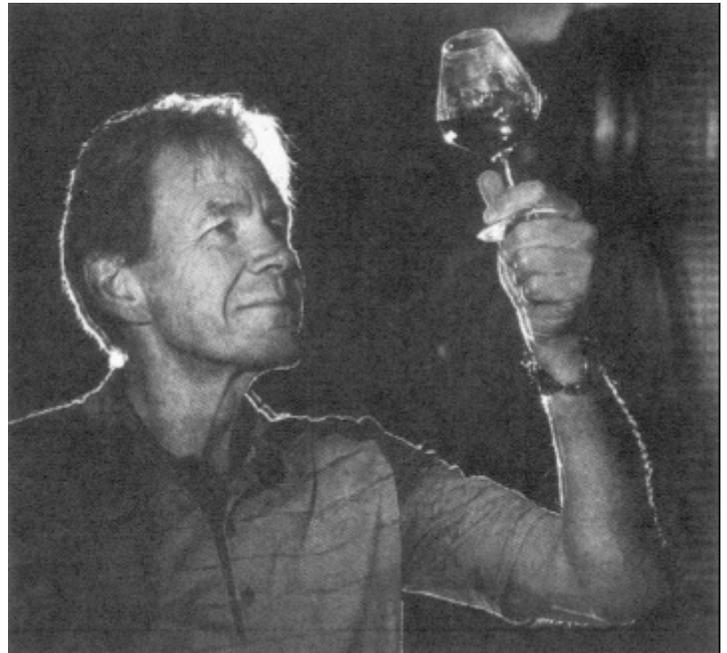
- Pinots Noirs, 1989: Clos de la Roche, Domaine Dujac; Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir, Calera.

- Pinots Noirs, 1996: Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir, Calera; Grand Échezeaux, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti; Charmes-Chambertin, Domaine Dujac.

Calera did well. To my surprise, I found I had voted a Calera wine first in every flight except the chardonnays.

Could we have been set up? It was unlikely; the French wines were among the best Burgundy can offer. Besides, Mr. Johannes, who buys Burgundy professionally, chose a French wine first in each flight except the second and fourth.

American pinots noirs do have an advantage in this kind of contest: it's called consistency. While they may not reach the heights of some truly great Burgundies, they perform well,



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

WHAT COMPETITION? Josh Jensen, the owner of the Calera Wine Company in California, specializes in making fine pinot noirs.

sometimes magnificently, year after year.

Burgundy is the most unpredictable of wines. Not too many years ago, it was normal to expect only one really good vintage out of five in Burgundy.

In poor years, illegal chaptalization — adding large amounts of sugar during fermentation — was commonplace, and so was the addition of heavy wine from the South of France.

Modern cellar and vineyard practices, along with more stringent regulations, have ended most of the fraud of the bad old days, but even honestly made Burgundies today can be notoriously temperamental.

In last week's tasting, the 1985 Amiot Clos de la Roche and the 1996 Dujac Charmes-Chambertin, while not bad, were clearly underperformers, with unappealing aromas and flavors.

France's two most famous wines, Bordeaux and Burgundy, are grown in marginal weather. Bordeaux is about as far north as it is possible to ripen good cabernet sauvignon, and

the Côte d'Or marks the limit of the area where good pinot noir can be grown.

Once, conventional wisdom held that good Burgundy-style pinot noir could never be grown in California. Now it can be found from Santa Barbara in the south to Ukiah in the north, to say nothing of the vineyards of the Willamette Valley farther north in Oregon.

Pinot noir is very much at home in America and, as Calera's wines show, can hold its own in any competition.

The winery's Mount Harlan chardonnay, grown and produced on the estate, while hardly as well known as the pinot noir, is exceptionally good. It is lean and intense, like good white Burgundy. And it is blessedly free of the excessive weight and oakiness that characterize so many California chardonnays.

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