

San Jose Mercury News

Pinot noir from near Hollister defies skeptics

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2005

Josh Jensen has had to fight a lot of misconceptions in the 30 years since he started Calera Vineyards.

There was the belief back in 1975, when he planted his first vineyards, that California pinot noir would never be any good. (At that point, admittedly, most of it wasn't.)

Then there was the notion that San Benito County, Calera's location, was simply too hot for pinot noir. Many of California's best growing regions for pinot are near the ocean; Calera is farther inland, south of Hollister, and days can get fairly hot. But the marine influence is still there, in the form of morning fog and afternoon winds.

Jensen persisted, and Calera Vineyards has gained a reputation for distinctive, complex pinot noirs. Calera pinots are powerful, but it's a different kind of power from what's found in so many California pinot noirs. Those wines get their power from ripeness and big fruit. Some are downright heavy. Calera pinots get their power from their structure. Far from being heavy, the wines retain elegance.

I've tasted Calera wines off and on over the years, but I'd never visited the winery and vineyards. The winery and tasting room are easy to get to — they're 12 miles south of Hollister, near a couple of other tasting rooms. But I was unprepared for just how remote the vineyards are. Although they're only a few miles as the crow flies from the winery, they must be reached via a circuitous route, much of it over a dirt road that often becomes impassable during the rainy season. It's amazing Jensen found the site at all.

The dirt was the key. Jensen, a

California native and Yale graduate in history, earned a master's degree in anthropology at Oxford and then lived in France for a few years. He spent a couple of harvests in Burgundy, one at Domaine de la Romanee-Conti and one at Domaine Dujac. Burgundy's Cote d'Or is basically a 30-mile-long ridge of limestone and Jensen subscribed to the Burgundian belief that limestone was essential to growing world-class pinot noir and chardonnay.

So when he returned to Californian 1971, he looked for pockets of limestone as potential vineyard sites — not an easy task, because limestone isn't a common geologic feature in a state dominated by granite. He searched maps from the state's bureau of mines; limestone deposits, he says, were "little amoeba-like things" color-coded in gray. Jensen discovered the patches of gray he was looking for in the northern Gavilan mountains between Monterey and San Benito counties.

The property Jensen found was replete with limestone outcroppings. In fact, it had been a limestone quarry in the 19th century and included an 1860 limekiln. The winery took its name from that kiln — calera is Spanish for limekiln — and an image of the 30-foot-tall structure adorns Calera labels.

In 1975, Jensen planted 24 acres of pinot noir in three parcels, which he called Jensen, Selleck and Reed vineyards. Each of the vineyards, which were at an altitude of about 2,200 feet, has slightly different soils and exposures. Since then he's planted more pinot noir, some chardonnay and a tiny plot of viognier. About three-quarters of his vineyard acreage is pinot.

Jensen received federal approval for the Mount Harlan

American Viticultural Area in 1990; Calera's vineyards are the only ones within the appellation. The soils there are very poor; which naturally limits yields — the historical average, Jensen says, is 1.5 tons an acre, an astonishingly low number. The pinot noir grapes are so small they barely look like grapes at all. "That's why our wines are very concentrated and tannic in their early years," Jensen says.

The current releases from most California pinot producers are from the 2002 or 2003 vintages; most of Calera's are from 2001, and they're still extremely tight. There are five single-vineyard pinots.

The Selleck Vineyard (\$55) is often the most expressive Calera pinot, and that's true in 2001. Though it still needs time in the bottle, the wine displays plenty of rich raspberry and spice, and a fine tight structure. **The 2001 Mills Vineyard (\$40)**, from a vineyard Jensen planted in 1874, is also very rich and has a minerality that reflects the limestone in the soil. **The 2001 Reed Vineyard (\$45)** is a little leaner at this point, while the **2001 Jensen (\$50)** is very tight, with a spicy minerality.

The newest pinot in the Calera stable is the **2002 Ryan Vineyard (\$40)**, named for longtime vineyard manager Jim Ryan. The wine is spicy and fairly tannic, with cherry flavors accented by some herbaceous notes.

I recently tasted some Calera pinots from the 1980s and '90s. Although he '87 Reed and '88 Mills had seen better days, the 1987 Jensen was still quite fresh, with tart red cherry flavors and some earthy, mushroomy notes, and the 1987 Selleck was rich, earthy and supple.

From the 1997 vintage, the Reed was a spoiled bottle. The

Mills tasted a shade dried out, but the Jensen and the Selleck were showing extremely well. The Jensen had loads of juicy red cherry and raspberry flavors, with still-firm tannins, while the Selleck was richer and smoother. It's possible to buy older vintages of the Jensen and Mills pinots, because the winery holds some bottles and sells them when they've aged some; some '97s and '98s are being offered now. "That's been helpful in letting people see how good they are" with some age, Jensen says.

Calera also makes a reliably delicious **Central Coast pinot noir** from purchased fruit. The **2002 (\$20)** has a wonderful purity of fruit, with ripe flavors of cherry and crushed strawberry. The texture is very supple.

Though Calera is best known for pinot noir, the winery also produces some whites. The current release of the **Mount Harlan chardonnay, 2000 (\$34)**, is lean and structured, with creamy pear, lemon and mineral flavors. Jensen also poured a 1995 to let me see how the wine ages. It was rich, fleshy and still vibrant. There's also a **2002 Central Coast chardonnay (\$14)** that offers a lot of richness and complexity at a very reasonable price. Drink it now.

Calera also makes a small amount of a lovely **Mount Harlan viognier**, grown at the base of a limestone knoll. The **2003 (\$36)** is bright and creamy, with flavors of white peach, jasmine and, not surprisingly, mineral.

Some of the wines are extremely limited, but Calera has a wine club. For details, go to www.calerawine.com.

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