

# Calera

mining  
pinot noir  
on a  
limestone  
mountain

by Steve Pitcher



**Josh Jensen believes that, more than climate, it is limestone soil that provides the primary building blocks for making truly great Pinot Noir:**

One thing absolutely guaranteed to rattle the cage of Calera Wine Company's proprietor, Josh Jensen, is the assertion by someone who doesn't know any better that Hollister's weather is hot. "For some reason, people – except those of us who live here – always and automatically, imagine that Hollister's a hot place. Many of these folks are under the misconception that we're 'somewhere near Bakersfield,' in the blazing hot Central Valley. It ain't so."

Hollister, you see, is Calera's mailing address. Jensen's vineyards are just 12 miles south of this sleepy town, located on a particularly active stretch of the San Andreas Fault, where streets and sidewalks show the cracks and buckling accumulated over years from the frequent tremors that mark this jiggly part of the state as prime earthquake country.

The very suggestion that a vineyard is located in a warm zone is enough to convince most wine lovers that it's not an appropriate source for fine Burgundian varietals, especially Pinot Noir.

The prevailing wisdom in California, gained after years of frustration and almost complete failure with the variety, when it was planted indiscriminately throughout the state – often cheek to jowl

with cabernet sauvignon and zinfandel – is that superior sites for pinot noir are pockets close to the Pacific Ocean or tucked into a maritime river valley. There, the temperatures are uniformly cool and misty (see "America's Pinot Noir Zones" in the August/September 1999 issue of *The Wine News*).

Some of the misconception about temperature in and around Hollister (and thus Calera's vineyards) may be due to the fact that both are located in relatively obscure San Benito County, a rugged inland expanse, devoid of a coastline or maritime river valley, east of Monterey County.

So, how cool is Calera's hometown of Hollister? Armed with an authoritative statistical tome published by the University of California in 1993, Jensen was able to establish that Hollister, during the months of April through September, is on average cooler than its northerly pinot-growing neighbors. Its maximum average temperature of 78 degrees compares favorably to the Napa Valley towns of St. Helena (83.3 degrees) and Napa (79.5 degrees), and the Sonoma County towns of Healdsburg (83.5 degrees) and Sonoma (83.8 degrees). The study tracked daily average air temperatures at recording sites throughout the state over a 30-year period (1961 to 1990).>



**Above left:** The winery took its name from the property's 100-year-old limestone *calera* (Spanish for lime kiln). **Above right:** The Reed and Selleck vineyards provide prime pinot noir. GAYLE GLEASON  
**Opposite page:** The Selleck Vineyard Pinot Noir, grown in extremely rocky, limestone soil, is, by the author's estimation, Calera's most spectacular achievement. TERISANDBSON

Actually, Jensen has simply lucked out on the temperature issue. When he chose this area for his pinot noir vineyards, it was because of what was in the ground, not the local climate.

In the early 1970s, Jensen spent a couple of years in Burgundy, where he apprenticed himself to several winemakers, including those at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and Domaine Dujac. He came away from the experience determined to turn his love of wine, especially Pinot Noir, into his life's work. Back in California at the end of 1971, he embarked on a search for limestone.

"While the UC-Davis textbooks I'd seen in those days said climate was the most important consideration, followed by grape variety, winemaking skills and then, maybe, soil, my approach after [living in] Burgundy was different. I was determined to find limestone, then worry about whether or not the area was too hot or too cold," Jensen explains.

"My mentors in Burgundy had told me that, for reasons no one fully understood, limestone soil was the absolute key for producing world-class Pinot Noir," Jensen recounts. Noting that Burgundy's most revered and celebrated Pinot Noirs are produced from grapes grown in the Côte d'Or, a narrow, 40-mile-long, limestone-rich strip of hillside in the heart of Burgundy, Jensen was convinced that the soil on the flanks of that limestone ridge "accounts for everything."

But in California, limestone is in relatively short supply. "When you find some," Jensen notes, "it always seems to be at the bottom of a canyon, or in a cliff face on which you couldn't possibly plant vines." After more than two years of chasing all around the state, working from Bureau of Mines mineral deposit maps and topographical studies, Jensen finally hit viticultural pay dirt: A hillside with continuous limestone deposits of several million tons, 2,200 feet above sea level on Mt. Harlan in the Gavilan

Mountains, east of Monterey County.

Limestone (*calcaire* in French) had, in fact, been commercially quarried from the property 100 years earlier, as evidenced by the existence there of a well-preserved, 30-foot-tall masonry *calera* (Spanish for lime kiln) from that era. It would become the symbol, or logo, of Jensen's Calera Wine Company.

"This property is 90 miles south of San Francisco and about 25 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean," Jensen explains, "roughly level with the city of Monterey. The potential vineyard sites on the property were all at 2,200 feet above sea level, or even higher, meaning that these future vineyards would be among the highest, and the coldest, in California."

The chill comes from cold marine air carried eastward by prevailing westerlies from the Pacific Ocean and the great eastward indentation in the coastline of Monterey Bay in an unobstructed, high-altitude flight path that reaches the upper elevations of the Gavilan Mountains and Mt. Harlan. Temperature is further influenced by the height of the vineyards themselves. Climatologically, the higher one goes up a mountain, the cooler it gets. The rule of thumb (called the "lapse rate") is that temperature drops, on average, about 3 degrees for every 1,000-foot rise in elevation.

Because of this Region I-like microclimate, vineyards on Mt. Harlan have a very long growing season. "Our harvest normally occurs in the third or fourth week of October," Jensen notes, late by any measure. By comparison, he remembers, "The last of the 1998 harvest came in during the month of November," and some of it – the viognier – didn't ripen fully at all, and had to be sold off in bulk.

Yields in these arid, steeply sloped mountain vineyards are consistently low, rarely exceeding 2 tons per acre. In 1996, yield was a mere 1.5 tons, resulting in concentrated, deeply flavored wines.

Due to minute differences in their soils and exposures, each of Calera's four pinot noir vineyards

(named for people important in Jensen's life) has its own expression. Selleck (5 acres) is rockier and contains more limestone than the others, and its wine, by my estimation the most spectacular of Calera's achievements, seems to have the greatest aging potential. Reed (5 acres) has the deepest, darkest soils, which usually results in the wine's earthiness and a chocolate component. Jensen (14 acres) has both southern and northern exposures, resulting in complex, wonderfully fragrant Pinot. And Mills (12 acres) is at the lowest elevation, and produces Pinot with a fragrant, floral quality suggesting gardenias, along with ripe cherry and red berry fruit.

At their best, Calera Pinots are impressive for their combination of intense fruit, seductive aromas, velvety texture and excellent acid backbone.

"The Pinot Noirs grown on Mt. Harlan will normally be best at between 6 and 12 years of age," Jensen advises. "If you drink them younger than 6 years you're definitely robbing the cradle. They might taste pretty good young, but they're definitely going to get better with a few years' aging."

### A splendidly lonely place

"It's hard to imagine how remote and isolated that original property was, and still is today," Jensen says. "You feel like you're in another century. To get to it from the winery, you have to drive more than four miles on a dirt road that climbs a thousand feet in elevation. The property has no inherent water supply – no wells and no year-round springs – and to this day, there's no electrical or telephone service up there."

Jensen purchased 324 acres of remote, steep terrain laced with the magical, Burgundian ingredient of limestone in 1974. A 1-acre test block of 500 pinot noir vines proved successful, and the following year, Jensen and company planted another 23 acres with 15,000 pinot noir vines in three separate parcels that





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make up the Selleck, Reed and Jensen vineyards (the latter incorporating the original test block area and vines).

“The cuttings came mostly from a test block at Chalone Vineyard, some 18 miles away, which was believed to contain budwood from Romanée-Conti and, maybe, Vosne-Romanée. Two-thirds of the Jensen Vineyard was planted with California nursery grafts,” he explains, “but all of Reed, Selleck and one-third of Jensen were planted with the Chalone wood, because a lot of the local pinot noir at that time was of uncertain pedigree, and I felt more secure going with what was believed to be true Burgundian cuttings.” To this day, the resultant vine, which is used for all new Calera plantings, is referred to as the “Calera clone.”

In 1982, Jensen purchased an

adjoining 300-acre, limestone-rich parcel, where he planted the 12-acre Mills Vineyard to pinot noir.

In a major expansion in 1997, Jensen put in 13 acres of pinot noir in a very steep field that lies between the Jensen and Mills vineyards. And last year he planted another 15 acres on the back side of the mountain, including a new 10-acre pinot noir vineyard, as yet unnamed.

All told, Calera’s vineyards in the Mt. Harlan AVA, established in 1990 in response to Calera’s petition to federal authorities, now total 75 acres – 47 bearing and 28 not yet bearing – all sited at least 2,200 feet above sea level. Calera is the only winery with vineyards in the 7,400-acre appellation, and thus the only winery to designate Mt. Harlan on its labels.

## Putting Calera to the test

Jensen is especially keen on having his Pinots judged blind against the finest Burgundian *grands crus*. His wines usually come out on top, or at least hold their own. The first of these exercises I attended took place at Monterey’s *Sardine Factory* restaurant in November 1986, presided over by the irrepressible Fred Dame, a master sommelier who has since moved on to a lofty corporate position in the wine world. On that occasion, five separate vintages of Calera Selleck Vineyard Pinot Noir (’79, ’81, ’82, ’83, ’84) were judged superior, or at least equal, to the same vintages of Echézeaux from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Jensen is always particularly pleased when his wines outshine this king of Burgundy’s producers from his old training ground.

In advance of this article, matched vintages of Mt. Harlan Calera versus *grand cru* Burgundy were evaluated in a blind tasting conducted at the renowned *Rubicon* restaurant in San Francisco. The panel consisted of myself, Larry Stone, M.W., *Rubicon*’s wine director, Wilfred Wong, wine buyer for Beverages & more!, two collector friends with an affinity for fine Burgundy and American Pinot Noir, and Josh Jensen, who participated in a non-voting capacity. Listed in order of panel preference are the results:

**1. Calera, 1996 Pinot Noir, Jensen Vineyard** - (\$N/A): This wine was preferred over the 1996 Richebourg from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (\$225 wholesale), exhibiting exotic spice and violets in the nose, a velvety texture and a deep core of black cherry-strawberry fruit; quite harmonious and well rendered.

**2. Calera, 1995 Pinot Noir, Selleck Vineyard** - (\$38): This wine was preferred over the 1995 Corton from Tolle-Beaut (\$53 retail), impressing with its intensely fruity perfume of wild strawberries and spice, rich red fruits on the palate enhanced by a subtle hint of green herbs, fine acidity and wonderful complexity.

**3. Domaine Maume, 1985 Mazis-Chambertin** - (\$100, auction purchase): This wine nudged out the

Calera Reed Vineyard 1985 Pinot Noir (\$25 on release) because of its decadent, thoroughly seductive nose of good Burgundian barnyard, leather and mushrooms, and wonderfully evolved, sweet pinot fruit. As “exotically kinky” as only great Chambertin can be, noted Larry Stone. The Reed acquitted itself respectably, however, offering a mature bouquet of crushed strawberries and prune compote, still lively, complex, spicy red fruit on the palate and a hint of chocolate in the extended finish.

While the 1996 Calera Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir won’t be released until next year, the 1996 Calera Selleck Vineyard Pinot Noir, Mt. Harlan (\$80) has been released and is already showing quite well. It offers forward, fragrant, expressive aromas of ripe strawberry-raspberry-black cherry fruit. It’s rich, smooth and succulent on the palate, with supple tannins, deep, intense flavors of wild strawberry enhanced by lightly smoky oak. The lingering finish is tinged with a mild green herbaceousness. The Selleck is very impressive and complex, even now.

Blessed with a combination of factors that would be envied by any Pinot Noir producer – either in the U.S. or Burgundy – including a vast expanse of limestone-infused hillside, cool temperatures, low yields and an extended growing season, Calera is the California winery best situated to produce Pinot Noir closest to the Burgundian ideal. It exhibits a level of ripeness and depth that Burgundy can only dream of achieving in the very best of years. That Calera’s Pinots usually outshine the *grands crus* from the Côte d’Or is hardly surprising, for the Mt. Harlan winery is turning out the finest wines ever in its 25-year history.

As we were leaving the tasting, Stone could be overheard attempting to persuade Jensen to increase *Rubicon*’s allocation of Calera Pinots for his impressive wine list. A telling moment that speaks volumes about the wine. ☺

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