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On Wine ROBERT WHITLEY

Wine culture embodied in the Calera cult

Some of us can remember a time when Josh Jensen's Calera Wine Co. was considered a cult winery.

Jensen, a young man at the time, had recently lived a magical wine experience, and he had a dream. Of course, this was more than a quarter-century ago, and Jensen must have seemed a bit the fool wandering the dry hillsides of coastal California in search of the perfect location to plant pinot noir.

But Jensen was nobody's fool. He was a graduate of Yale and had earned a master's degree in anthropology at Oxford, where he competed on the rowing team that defeated Cambridge in 1967. Jensen later moved to France and became fluent in the language.

After working consecutive harvests at two of the world's greatest wineries – Domaine de la Romanee-Conti and Domaine Dujac – Jensen returned to his native California enamored of burgundy, the French red wine made from pinot noir grapes.

He had been convinced by his mentors in Burgundy that the best pinot noir sprang from soil with rich limestone deposits. It was only after an exhaustive two-year search that he came across an abandoned limestone quarry high atop Mount Harlan, a remote location 90 miles south of San Francisco in San Benito County.

Jensen founded Calera in 1975 and harvested his first crop of Mount Harlan grapes in 1978. This was at a time when pinot noir produced in Califor-

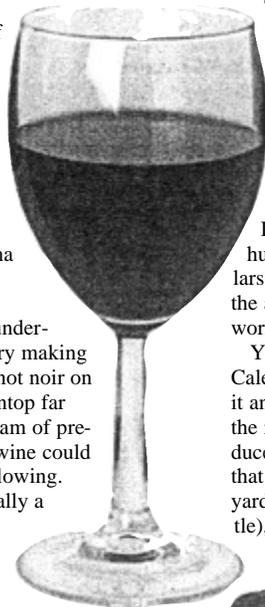
nia was barely palatable. Most of the state's wine renown came from cabernet sauvignon. All of the great names – Mondavi, BV, Ridge, Stag's Leap, Heitz, Chateau Montelena – owed their success to cabernet.

So it's easy to understand how a winery making mind-boggling pinot noir on a remote mountaintop far from the mainstream of premium California wine could develop a cult following.

"We weren't really a cult winery by today's definition," Jensen notes modestly. "A cult winery today sells only, or mostly, to consumers. A cult winery severely restricts production, planting only on one, two or three acres, even though it may have 40.

"We always sold our wine through distributors, who then sell to restaurants and wine shops and eventually to consumers."

It may seem a fine distinction, but there is an important difference. Calera is one of the world's few great boutique wineries that an ordinary wine enthusiast can still appreciate.



There isn't a great deal of the wine, and it's not cheap, but you needn't be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company to buy it.

The Calera pinot noirs, chardonnays and viogniers are wines for people who love wine, unlike the latter-day cult wines (Screaming Eagle, Harlan, Grace Family, Colgin, et al) that sell for hundreds, even thousands of dollars and are often sold and resold on the auction market as if they were works of art.

You plunk down \$80 for a 1997 Calera "Selleck" Pinot Noir, you drink it and revel in the aromas, the depth, the nuance. Only 460 cases were produced. Enjoy it while it lasts. From that same vintage, Calera's Reed Vineyard yielded 860 cases (\$65 per bottle), the Mills Vineyard 1,400 cases (\$65) and the Jensen 1,700 cases (\$75).

Among the stars of California pinot noir, icons such as Dehlinger, Williams Selyem and Gary Farrell, Calera has the lowest yields because of its challenging mountaintop location, which at 2,200 feet makes it one of the highest vineyard sites in the United States.

Jensen has been true to his original vision of a Burgundian estate, with the exception of his concession to fad with the planting of viognier in 1985. Like the pinot noir and chardonnay, the Calera viognier has been among

the finest in California since its introduction.

"I love it," Jensen says of viognier, "but I was never one of those people who thought it would replace chardonnay. I see its best utility and use as a change of pace. It's the perfect thing for that; it's so unique and fruity and exotic."

Calera's Mount Harlan Viognier (\$36) and Mount Harlan Chardonnay (\$38) retail for considerably less than its celebrated pinot noirs, and the Central Coast chardonnay (\$22) and pinot noir (\$24) are excellent value wines.

Jensen has narrowed his vineyard sources for the Central Coast wines through trial and error, and now he has reliable vineyards for both the pinot noir and the chardonnay. The current vintage of 1999 reflects the quality of selection. Both wines are beautifully made.

It is refreshing and unusual to find a California cult winery that commits itself to making wines that are meant for people to drink. It's just another thing I think the idealistic young American picked up from his mentors in Burgundy so long ago.

It tells me the Calera wine culture is one wine cult worth keeping.

Wine Finds

Exceptional

- Travaglini 1997 "Tre Vigne"

Gattinara, Italy (\$40) – This powerful Gattinara from the exceptional 1997 vintage is rich and tannic. It needs three to five more years to shed its hard exterior, but it has the depth to improve over the long haul.

Very good

• St. Francis 1999 Merlot, Sonoma County (\$24) – One of the finest red-wine values in California, this vintage of St. Francis Merlot has outstanding depth, power and finesse. It's a sleek, polished merlot that is head and shoulders above the majority of the crowd in its price category.

Good value

• Hugel 2000 Pinot Blanc, France (\$12) – Don't give up on pinot blanc until you've tried one from Alsace. This one has loads of rich flavor for the price.

• Canyon Road 2000 Merlot, California (\$10) – Merlot lovers who need an inexpensive everyday wine that meets their basic flavor and character requirements should back up the SUV to the loading dock and haul the Canyon Road home by the case.

Visit Whitley On Wine on the Web at www.whitleyonwine.com; send e-mail to whitonwine@aol.com. Listen to "The Food and Wine Hour with Robert Whitley" Saturdays from noon to 1 p.m. and 10 to 11 p.m. on KSDO-AM/1130.

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