

Food & wine

Lone wolf popularizes pinot noir for U.S. palate

By Jerry Shriver
USA TODAY

HOLLISTER, Calif. – A monument to 25 years of contrariness lies here at the end of a dirt lane 1,200 feet high in the Gabilan Mountains east of Monterey Bay.

Tucked away amid scrub brush along the San Andreas Fault is the home of one of California's most iconoclastic vintners, a key player in the emergence of American pinot noir.

Starting with his first vintage in 1975, Josh Jensen of Calera Wine Co. has gone far, far out of his way to do things differently compared with his peers in the hallowed vineyards of Napa and Sonoma 140 miles to the north. And though today he is making a few conventional moves – introducing a new wine, raising prices to match his competitors, building an office to replace the trailer he has rented for 16 years – Jensen remains the curious outsider, happily and stubbornly stuck down here in San Benito County.

"The lone-wolf image that others have of me is true, because I have followed my own drummer," says Jensen, 56, who lives in a cabin next to the no-frills winery, on the site of a former rock-crushing operation. The three or four intrepid fans who make their way here during any given week find the loner presiding not over a stylish tasting room, but a dusty outdoor picnic table.

"By comparison, Napa and Sonoma are Beverly Hills," Jensen says. "I go up there and have the best time."

Jensen's individualistic beat sounded early on. After earning a master's degree in anthropology from Oxford and playing bit parts in movies, he locked onto a career path while picking grapes one fall in France's Burgundy region. There, he encountered wines – especially red ones made from the

Matching Burgundy across the spectrum

Calera Wine Co. is best known for its lush, earthy pinot noirs, which in the 1980's were among the first in California to achieve critical acclaim. Today, the wines from Calera's Selleck (\$80), Jensen (\$75), Reed (\$65) and Mills (\$55) vineyards regularly hold their own with top-flight burgundies in blind taste tests. Cost-conscious consumers can get a feel for the Calera style via the 1998 Central Coast Pinot Noir (\$24) and new 1997 *Mélange* Pinot Noir (\$40), available in stores and restaurants in major markets.

Less heralded but also delicious are Calera's white wines, chardonnay and viognier. The 1997 Mt. Harlan Chardonnay (\$38), 1998 Central Coast Chardonnay (\$22) and 1999 Mt. Harlan Viognier (\$36) are also available in stores and restaurants in major markets.

pinot noir grape – "that I responded to on a very emotional plane. It was 'Wow! I'm in love!'"

He decided to try to re-create that sensation in California, where mass-produced "burgundy" jug wines had convinced most people "that American pinot noir was no good and never would be."

Jensen figured that if he could find limestone soil and climatic conditions in California similar to those in Burgundy, he could grow comparable grapes.

"I'm absolutely convinced I did the right thing," says Jensen, who spent two years and thousands of dollars locating sufficient limestone deposits amid the granite that

makes up most of California. The land was high up, on a nearly inaccessible part of Mount Harlan, but within a few years he was making lush, decadent wines using old-fashioned, minimalist Burgundian techniques instead of the high-tech approach favored by most California vintners.

His first pinot noirs, priced at a then-hefty \$18, appeared just as America was beginning its long infatuation with white wines.

"We lost money during the first 12 years we were in business," Jensen says.

But during the 1980s, critical acclaim for his wines slowly mounted, followed by consumer acceptance and healthy profits. Today, Calera's top-of-the-line single-vineyard pinot noirs (\$55-\$80) are coveted by collectors and restaurateurs, even though Jensen has recently doubled some of the prices ("If you don't charge what your competitors do, people think your wines aren't as good," he says). His just-released *Mélange* (\$40), a blend of his high-end pinot noirs, is selling briskly.

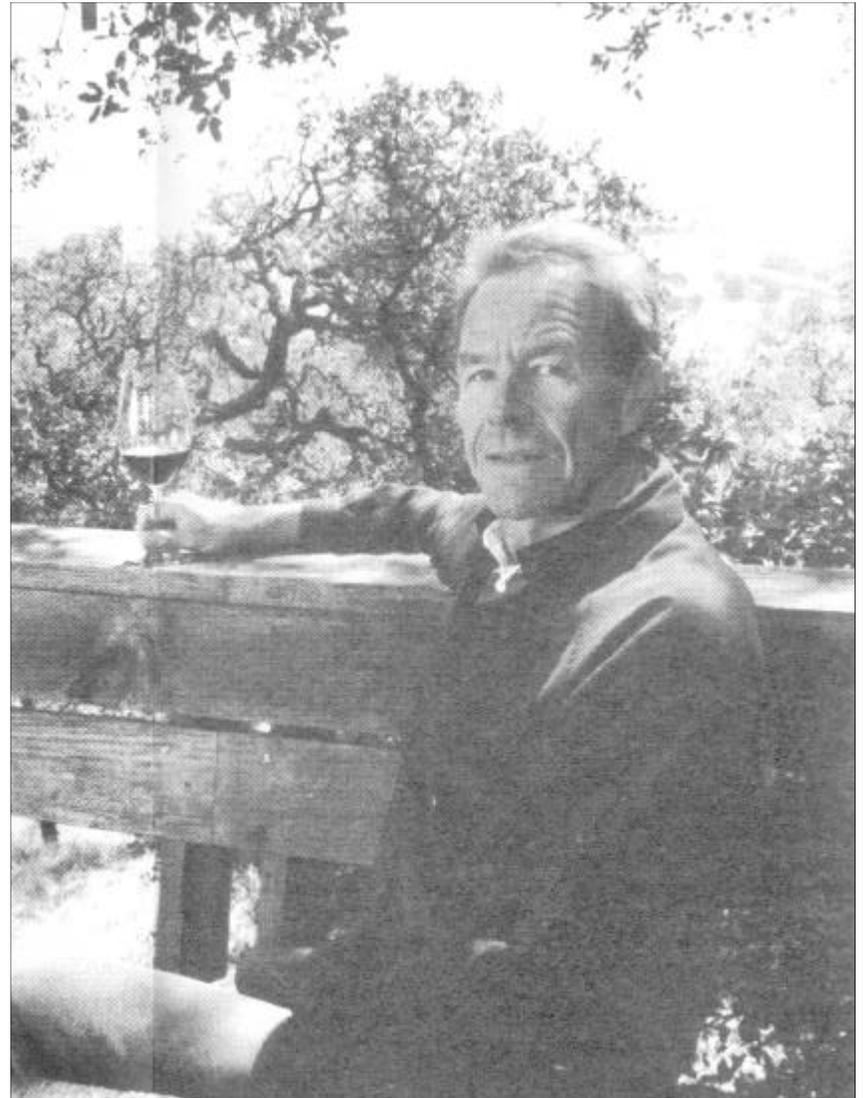
One of his most fanatical followings is in Japan, where Calera wines are sometimes mentioned in a popular comic strip known as the "*Doonesbury* of Japan," featuring a crime-fighting oenophile named Joe Satake. "People really go overboard there," Jensen says.

"I went there a year ago, and at the tastings not a single empty bottle was thrown away. People would get them and stand in line, and I'd sign every one."

Back in the USA, Jensen has helped popularize Burgundy's famous grape and low-tech winemaking; pinot noir is now America's third-most-popular red, behind cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

"These are the good old days for pinot noir," he says.

"I feel like an outsider only in terms of geography."



By Dorian Hanner for USA TODAY

Wisdom from the mountaintop: Josh Jensen operates a no-frills winery in Hollister.