

A CONVERSATION WITH

Josh Jensen

After selling winery to Duckhorn, a Pinot pioneer reflects

By Laurie Daniel

World-class Pinot Noir from California seemed an improbable goal back in 1975, when Josh Jensen planted his first vineyards at Calera Wine Co. Jensen, a California native, had spent a couple of harvests in Burgundy in the early 1970s, and the place and its wines were a revelation to him.

So when he returned home with the intention of producing his own wines, he looked for something familiar to all Burgundians: limestone. Jensen found it in the hills outside Hollister, in San Benito County, Calif., and established Calera.

Over the years, Calera gained a reputation for the distinctive single-vineyard Pinots produced from the winery's estate vineyards on Mt. Harlan, which became an American Viticultural Area in 1990. Jensen himself gained a reputation as a pioneer and a visionary.

So the announcement in August 2017 that Calera was being sold to Duckhorn Wine Co. came as a shock to many. But Jensen had been considering a sale for several years because, he says, his three kids weren't interested in the business. He says he didn't want any of "the giants" to buy it, and if the right buyer didn't come along, he wouldn't sell. "A legacy is very important to me," he adds.

Jensen had been friends with Duckhorn's founders, Dan and Margaret Duckhorn, and even though the company is now owned by private-equity firm TSG Consumer Partners, he thinks "it's a wonderful fit." Jensen plans to stay on at the winery for four more years.

Q You famously studied geologic maps to find limestone soils in California for your vineyard. Do you still think that soils were the most important thing? What about the influence of climate?

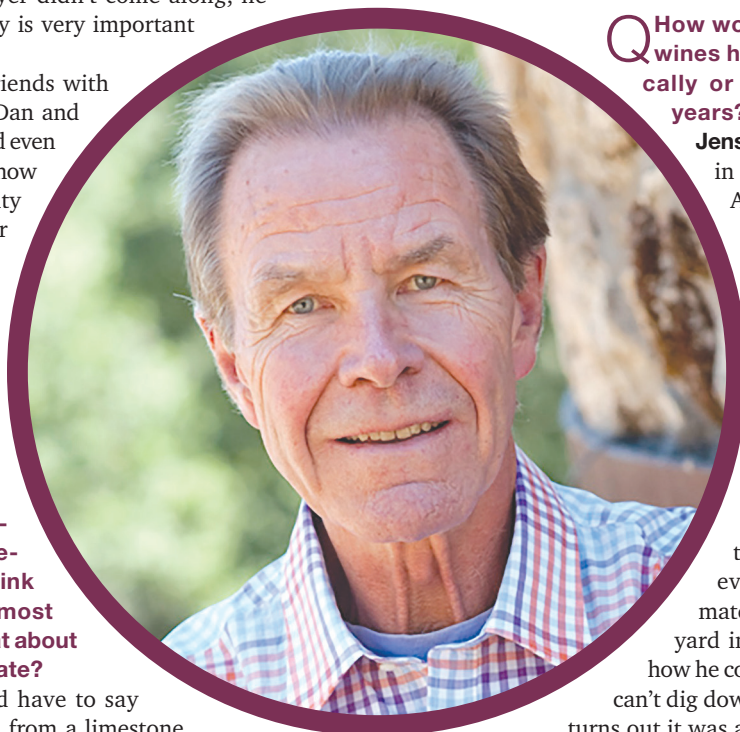
Josh Jensen: I would have to say that planting downhill from a limestone

deposit is the icing on the cake. It is a factor that can raise Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays from good to great. But climate is the most important thing. If your growing conditions are too hot, or not warm enough, you can't make great Pinot Noir. In the early years, people thought Hollister was too hot for Pinot Noir. I heard this so often that I actually purchased the University of California, Berkeley's annual book that records the 30-year temperature records for every town in the entire state. Using these records and a pocket calculator, I made a chart and compared Hollister to four other towns: St. Helena, Healdsburg, Napa and Sonoma. Using temperatures going back 20 years, I averaged each day for the growing season from April through October and ranked them by which was coolest in terms of nighttime temperatures. Hollister was the coolest. Hollister also had the lowest daytime maximum temperatures.

From where I sit in my office, I look out on the Diablo mountain range. This range, which goes from Mount Diablo deep into Southern California, separates the cool coastal air on the ocean side of the mountains from the hot air of the San Joaquin Valley. This climate is a key factor in lifting a Pinot Noir from the ordinary to the sublime.

Q How would you say that your wines have changed, stylistically or otherwise, over the years?

Jensen: I once asked a friend in the International Wine Academy, in which I am a member, what the difference is between shallow-rooted vines and older, deep-rooted vines. He said that the wines from shallow roots express the variety, while the wines from deep-rooted vines express the *terroir*. He said that the deepest vines he had ever seen were approximately 25 meters in a vineyard in the Loire. I wondered how he could know that, since you can't dig down that far to measure. It turns out it was a vineyard on a hill with



a wine cave underneath, and the vines had grown down through the top of the cave. I would guess that our own deepest vine roots at Calera are 40 to 50 feet in depth. So stylistically, I would say the biggest change in our wines is a reflection of our ever-deeper vine depth, not anything we do in the winery. Our deep, old vines give our wines more intensity and complexity than they did when they were younger and more shallow.

Many years back I was in France, and I had the opportunity to taste with Jacques Seysses of Domaine Dujac. We tasted two wines blind from the 1971 or 1972 vintage. One was lighter and quite pleasant, but the other was darker, more intense and more concentrated. It was a gorgeous wine, a real knockout. I thought the first was a village wine and the other was a Grand Cru. It turned out that both were Bonnes Mares, but the lighter one was from young, baby vines, while the other was from old vines with deep roots. That has always stayed with me. Old vines are the real McCoy. Today, I'm sure those young vines have matured and are making superb wines.

On a related note, about a dozen years ago, we began doing longer irrigation sets. When you do frequent irrigations, the roots stay shallow. As a result, you get very similar flavors to what you get from younger vines. We went from doing 1 gallon per hour of drip irrigation to doing eight-hour sets, then 12-hour sets, then 24-hour sets. Today, we apply 48-hour sets and sometimes do this just once a season. This forces the vines to go deeper and deeper in search of water, which, in turn, exposes the vines and the tap roots to new and interesting geology and yields more interesting flavors.

Another factor influencing our viticulture is climate change. Every grapegrower knows that climate change is upon us. With hotter summers, the sugars go up faster than flavor development, whereas the two used to go up in tandem. Now, with hotter days, the sugars shoot up fast while the flavors take their sweet time. Because of this, we have to pick at higher sugars, which results in higher alcohols. If we don't pick at higher sugars, the wines will be green, grassy and herbaceous.

About six or seven years ago, I was on a panel for In Pursuit of Balance (IPOB), and I brought two samples from the same block in the same vintage. One I knew I had picked too early, and it was about 13% alcohol. The other was picked later and was about 14% alcohol. The 13% wine had a nice low alcohol, but to me, it didn't have pleasant flavors. Most people wouldn't have shown it to the audience, but I wanted people to see the differences. About 15% of the attendees preferred the 13% wine, but roughly 85% preferred the 14% wine—and this was an IPOB audience. The 14% wine was ripe, but certainly not overripe. Nowadays, you have to wait longer

GOING RHÔNE ON THE CENTRAL COAST

Calera is best-known for Burgundy grape varieties (there's even a little Aligoté), but in 1987, Josh Jensen harvested his first Viognier.

Why add a Rhône grape? "Because I love Viognier!" Jensen exclaims. "When I lived in France, I would often stop at a two-Michelin-star restaurant in Condrieu and have lunch on their terrace, watching the barges coming up and down the river while drinking Château-Grillet. Viognier was not grown in the U.S. at that time, so upon my return I paid my \$75 fee to Foundation Plant Services, and they began the importation process."

Jensen says he knows that Viognier "is not for everyone. I've found that about 30% of wine drinkers don't care for its flavors. They can recognize that it's a good wine, but they still do not care for it. The other 70% like it a lot!"



to get the flavors that will receive the right reception. Thirty years ago, we were picking at 23° to 23.5° Brix. Today, we pick at 25° to 26° Brix just to get the same flavors.

Q Have your vineyard practices such as irrigation decisions, row orientation and trellising changed? What about rootstocks and clones?

Jensen: In addition to the irrigation practices I described, some other vineyard practices have changed since the early days. We started out training along a bilateral cordon. Our spacing for our first 20 years was 6 by 10 feet with 1-foot-wide rows. About 20 years ago, we got rid of bilateral cordons. Now it is just canes tied along wires, and we prune right back to the trunk every year. We have always had very low yields, which are good, but ours were too low. We want 2 tons per acre, which is still very low by almost anyone's standards. (If the yields are too high, Pinots can get watery.) But our yields were more like 1.25 tons per acre. Experts said not to use cordons, so we gradually converted everything to canes.

The second change we made after getting rid of cordons was to begin planting twice as many vines per acre in our newer sites, which allows us to get a larger crop per acre without any drop in quality. It was very expensive to do. It meant buying new tractors, twice as many grape stakes, twice as many rootings from nurseries and twice as many drip emitters. The new spacing is 4.5 by 7 feet. I was skeptical at first, but the higher density plantings give us darker colors and a crop closer to 2 tons per acre (well, more like 1.5 or 1.6). As we have replaced some vines in our older vineyards, we have also used the tighter spacing.

We also started out with St. George rootstock, which is good for a dry area like ours.

But we have put in more modern UC Davis crosses, so we don't plant new St. George today. We use five or six different UC Davis rootstocks, each chosen for how high up the mountain the vines are, as well as other features.

When we plant new vines, all of the budwood is from our original vineyard, with the budwood having been cleaned up over the years by Larry Hyde and Steve Kistler. This material is then grown for a year in nurseries.

Q In the beginning, you did whole-cluster fermentation on your Pinot Noir. Has your thinking on that evolved?

Jensen: With one exception, we have made all of our Mt. Harlan wines using a significant amount of whole clusters during fermentations since the beginning, and we still use approximately 70% to 80% whole clusters today. The exception is our more youthful de Villiers Vineyard, which was planted in 1997. For a time, our de Villiers Vineyard was like a juvenile delinquent; it was just too tannic. So tannic, in fact, that for five vintages we didn't bottle it as a single vineyard. Finally, in 2007, our winemaker, Mike Waller, said, "Let's try destemming." We destemmed it all, and that solved the excess tannin problem. As the vines have continued to mature, we have slowly increased the whole clusters each vintage from 10% in 2008 to 20% in 2009, and now we are at 70% to 80% whole clusters, and the wine is a favorite of many.

Our Central Coast Pinot Noir has followed an opposite trajectory, where we started destemming more fruit bit by bit each vintage, and now it is 100% destemmed. This makes the Central Coast Pinot much more approachable in its youth, which is what we intend and what people expect and want from the Central Coast Pinot Noir. While it will still be good after five years of cellaring, it's a wine you can buy and have that night for dinner. In



Jensen believes planting downhill from a limestone deposit can elevate wines from good to great.

contrast, fermenting our Mt. Harlan wines with a majority of whole clusters provides complexity, structure and makes the wines much more ageable. This is something people love. They know they can age our Mt. Harlan wines for 20-plus years, and they will not go over the hill.

Q As winery equipment has improved, has that changed your practices in the winery?

Jensen: In our third year, I designed a manual punchdown tool made for me by an inventor in San Francisco. It was like a stainless-steel pogo stick with a hinged plate on the bottom,

and one or two people would get on it and jump up and down to push the fermenting cap down to the bottom of the tank. Then Dick Graff of Chalone got an engineer in San Francisco to design a greatly improved pneumatic and hydraulic version, and now everyone uses this technology. It is a great labor-saving tool that works really well.

In 2012, we did get a new P & L Specialties sorting table with a belt that feeds our destemmer, and it has resulted in a big increase in quality. Almost all of the people who do our sorting are full-time people, and they do a fantastic job, but the table makes things even better.

Q For a time, you were using glass closures on some of your wines. Why did you discontinue them?

Jensen: We discontinued them because in 2010, we had a batch of bottles where the neck was slightly too large, and they leaked. It was a mess. That was the end of glass closures at Calera. 🍷

A resident of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Laurie Daniel has been a journalist for more than 35 years. She has been writing about wine for publications for more than 21 years and has been a *Wines & Vines* contributor since 2006.

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