

Calera was born from a great wine story. The estate's founder, Josh Jensen, was inspired by the great wines of Burgundy and understood that if he was to emulate them at home in California, he would have to find limestone soils. No mean feat: it took him nearly three years before he landed at the limestone hilltop called Mt Harlan. He spent every last penny he had on the site, planting Pinot Noir vines with his own hands, all the while living in a campervan.

Obsessive? Perhaps even a little crackers ... but Jensen created an estate that has become synonymous with exceptional Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines, revered the world over. Robert Parker once described Jensen as "one of the most compelling Pinot Noir specialists of not only the new world but of planet earth".

Jensen sold Calera to The Duckhorn Portfolio in 2017, but not before he had rigorously trained his protégé Mike Waller. "I started as the assistant winemaker in 2007, and Josh was the front and centre guy," Waller recalls. "When I became head winemaker three years later, Josh would say, if anyone asks, you tell them that *I am the executive head winemaker!*"

Jensen it seems, didn't loosen much grip on the reins, but the two clearly worked well together. "We agreed on ripeness and when to pick," says Waller. "I am more technical than Josh was, but we were aligned on taste, and had similar palates."

Jensen died in 2022, but his heritage is in secure and respectful hands. Waller lives and breathes Calera. When he talks about the vineyards, it is with an intimacy and depth of understanding that comes from love. He continues to work the vineyards with the commitment to stewardship that steered Jensen, and is proud of the estate's organic certification.

Calera has six Pinot Noir vineyards, all on Mt Harlan: Jensen, Selleck, Reed, Mills, Ryan and De Villiers. The single-vineyard wines are released on allocation each year.

**Jensen**, the flagship vineyard, was planted in 1975. It occupies four hillside



# A LEGACY IN LIMESTONE

In his quest to make California wines that could give Burgundy a run for its money, Calera founder Josh Jensen was obsessive in his choice of terroir. Today, his protégé Mike Waller is making wines that justify Jensen's groundbreaking work.

Calera wines are imported in the UK by Top Selection. Find out more about the range at [topselection.co.uk](https://topselection.co.uk)





Mike Waller

blocks, each with a different exposure.

**Mills** vineyard has recently been ripped out and is being replanted. Vines in this south east-facing plot, which has yielded fragrant, spicy Pinot Noir, were first planted in 1984 on their own roots, "which is partly the reason we have ripped it up: the vines can't thrive in the dry calcareous soils, so they're not productive," Waller explains. "Also, the site is late to ripen." The vineyard is being replanted on grafted rootstock, using cuttings from Calera's original vineyards.

**De Villiers** is Calera's second youngest vineyard and, even when Jensen was alive, it was a source of frustration for the team.

The wines could be bitter and phenolic, driving Jensen to his wits' end, and almost to a decision to rip the vineyard out. Waller stepped in and suggested that a solution might be to try destemming. With wines typically being 100% whole-cluster fermented, it was a significant step. This was in 2007 and tasting from barrel, the Jensen-Waller duo was delighted with how good the wines were.

"Over time, as the vines have aged and the roots have gone deeper into the limestone, the fruit has changed and by the time 2022 came, we were back to full cluster," Waller says. He believes that it is at de Villiers that he has had the biggest impact, picking smaller and smaller selections over time. The wines from here are typically precocious, fruit-forward and with a rich mouth feel.

**Ryan** vineyard, planted in 1998, it is the youngest and also the highest, reaching 762 metres above sea level. For Waller these vines have "more layers, more complexity ... the wines resemble bright red fruits, have a more grippy edge with a long finish and great complexity".

It says much of the respect that Jensen had for the people around him that the vineyards are all named after someone. Bookworms might recognise Marq de Villiers, author of *The Heartbreak Grape*, which tells the Calera story. Jim Ryan was the estate vineyard manager until 2017, and had no idea the site would take his name until he saw the first vintage in bottle in 2002. Everett Mills was a friendly neighbour who lent a hand in the early days.

Waller anthropomorphises the wines.

"Mt Harlan Ryan Vineyard Pinot Noir is the child that's heading to Harvard, is following in his big brother's footsteps and is looking to become a doctor or something similar. The Mills Vineyard Pinot Noir smoked a lot of pot back in the day but has grown up now and is running a social service programme. De Villiers Pinot Noir is that kid who just doesn't want to go to school and is still out there trying to find himself, spending his time going to Grateful Dead shows."

Pinot Noir reigns supreme at Calera, but equal attention should be paid to the stellar Chardonnay and Viognier wines. Jensen fell for Viognier's charms on a trip to the Rhône and was one of the pioneers of the grape in California, planting in 1983. The vineyard gives

low yields, but grapes with impressive minerality. Mt Harlan Viognier is driven by fruit complexity and acidity. Waller says: "It's not overly alcoholic or soapy. It has never seen new oak and is fermented in concrete."

Mt Harlan Chardonnay is a leaner wine than many of its Californian contemporaries, thanks to limestone soils. "I think it was a wine that was maybe a little overlooked in the past, and it's potential not fully understood, but today it has more lees and barrel ageing, which has made it more robust, with greater tension and a longer finish."

Fruit for the Central Coast wines comes from growers that Calera has worked with for many years. "I think there's actually more winemaking in these wines because we're piecing vineyards together and blending to make approachable wines that work well with food," says Waller.

**W**hat wine would Waller open if he could share a glass with Jensen today? "The 2021 Ryan, because Josh would taste it all grown up, softened up and with more complexity. Also, the 2022 Mills which was the last vintage, which never made it to market: to show what Mills was at the end of an era."

2025 is Calera's 50th year, which Waller acknowledges might not mean much to some old world properties. "In California we have made it and now we have to hold on to it for dear life, to pass on to the next generation," he says. "I want people to be talking about Calera in a hundred years, and how great it is. It is important we find the next generation who understand the culture, the standpoint, the wines and the vineyards."

Waller has been with Calera for 18 years, and you sense he is just getting comfortable.

Whatever they're saying in 2125, it's a racing certainty that Jensen's vision and Waller's devoted attention will be at the heart of the story.



Josh Jensen