

Japanese vintner to pop cork on \$100M Napa site

Twenty years and \$100 million in the making, Japanese tycoon Kenzo Tsujimoto's Napa winery is coming online at a seemingly inopportune time.

Kenzo Estate, set to open to the public on May 1, has been in the works since the chairman and founder of Japan's Capcom Co. video game giant bought the property in 1990.

He reportedly pulled out 120,000 grape vines and replanted, quietly producing several vintages for the Japanese market.

Kenzo Estate will formally launch in the U.S. market in the midst of a lingering recession that has been particularly tough on high-end wines, like those produced in the expensive Napa Valley.

Although the operation isn't designed for a recession-weary world, Vic Motto, chairman and CEO of Global Wine Partners, a St. Helena-based wine investment bank, said Kenzo shouldn't be counted out.

"You're launching into a (luxury wine) market that clearly has no way to go but up," Motto told the Business Times. "That category is coming back. It's already starting to turn around."

Kenzo Estate's signature wine, Rindo — a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot — will sell for \$75 a bottle. In its favor, the company is using consulting winemaker and Napa name Heidi Barrett, "master vineyard manager" David Abreu, and French Laundry owner and founder Chef Thomas Keller to put together its wines and on-site food pairings, such as a choice between a charcuterie plate or an offering from Keller's kitchen.

"Certainly Heidi knows what she's doing," Motto said. But at \$75 a bottle, he suggested, a winery these days needs to offer a wine "that needs to be completely worth \$75. It needs to be a bargain at that price."

The winery, set on a "luxurious yet serene" 4,000-acre Napa estate, is designed by winery specialist Backen Gilliam Architects and features 20,000 square feet of wine caves. Its 70 acres of vineyards were planted in 1998, after Tsujimoto and team spent several years searching for the best sites and exposures.

“Then David Abreu came on board and they tore most of the original vines out and either replanted or moved vineyard sites altogether,” said Toby Baird, a Kenzo Estate spokesman. In recent years, he said, “the property’s infrastructure has been built,” including the estate winery, tasting room and caves.

The Japan Times reported late last month that the winery’s recent shipment of 600 cases to Japan “sold out quickly,” and that buyers included Koju, a Michelin three-star restaurant in Tokyo’s prime Ginza shopping district.

At press time, Tsujimoto, who was in Japan, couldn’t be reached for comment. In a statement, he said his winery “offers an experience that is incomparable in all of Napa Valley — at an incredible value.”

The new vintages are available in the United States “on an extremely limited basis,” meaning in the tasting room, for winery club members and at a few California restaurants, such as the French Laundry and Bouchon restaurants in Yountville and Beverly Hills.

When Rindo’s new vintage is released in the fall, the company says, many other U.S. restaurants are expected to offer it