

HAUTE LIVING



The Recipe for a Perfect Blend

By Christina Bohnstengel

JAPANESE GAMING GURU KENZO TSUJIMOTO FOUND NAPA VALLEY TO BE A MUCH-NEEDED BREATH OF FRESH AIR, AND THE RESULTING KENZO ESTATE IS A COMBINATION OF THE FINEST INGREDIENTS OF THE REGION.

What is the winning recipe for opening a Napa Valley winery during a stressed economic time when conservative strategists would advise against it?

- One part owner with a penchant for fine wines, a love for Napa Valley, and a history of business success
- One part renowned cult winemaker
- One part celebrated vineyard manager
- One part famous and beloved chef

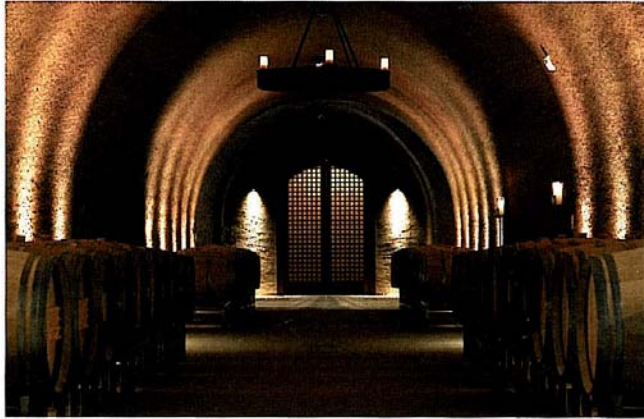
Over the course of a decade, Kenzo Tsujimoto concocted just such a recipe, and Kenzo Estate Winery opened on May 1 to much fanfare. Though it has just come out of the oven so to speak, by all accounts, it's a blue ribbon winner so far.

As the genius mind behind Capcom Group, a Japanese gaming company responsible for hits like *Resident Evil* and *Street Fighter*, Tsujimoto isn't the most likely winery owner. His company is based on keeping people glued to their screens. Yet in 1990, he went on a personal quest to experience the great outdoors and was struck by the beauty

of Napa Valley. "As you know, the gaming industry is quite indoor-based, and I was searching for a way to start spending more time outside," he explains in Japanese, which is relayed through an interpreter. On that quest, he purchased the property that today houses Kenzo Estate Winery and hospitality center. Opening a winery wasn't his original intention, however. The estate was once known as Wild Horse Valley Ranch, and it served as the training ground for the 1984 U.S. Olympic polo team. Initially, Tsujimoto thought that he would delve into a horse-related industry.

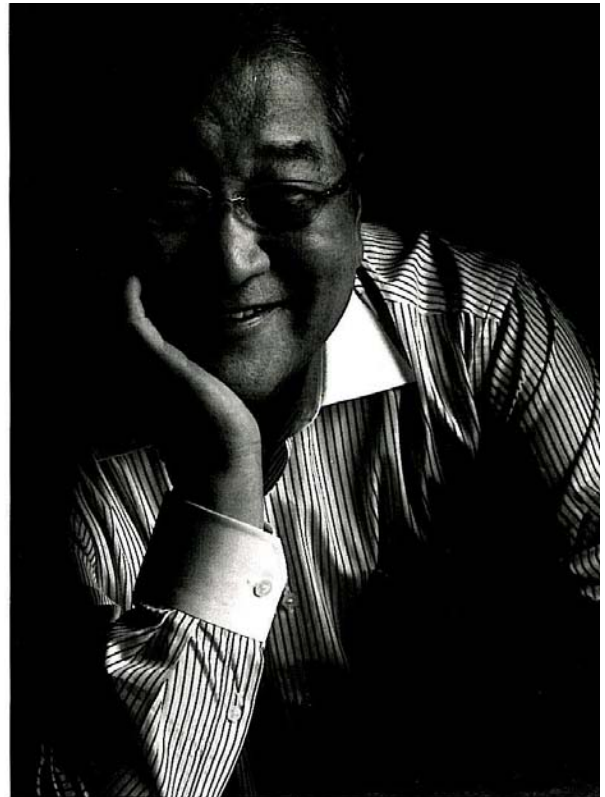
But the lure of the wine country worked

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HAUTE PARTNERS



Tastings

- Four Kenzo wines (1 ounce each) \$30 per person
- Four Kenzo wines (2 ounces each) with cheese \$50 per person
- The wine-paired lunch by Chef Thomas Keller \$60 per person



its magic, and it wasn't long before it was time to bring in a crucial ingredient. Enter David Abreu, a viticulturalist with a stellar reputation built with the best labels in the Valley. Tsujimoto then added respected wine consultant Heidi Barrett of cult wine Screaming Eagle fame, Marc Nanes from Hundred Acre, and noted Bay Area architect Howard Backen of Backen Gillam to the mix, and fueled it with a \$100-million investment of his own. The property's first batch of grapes was ready in 1998, but the team's perfectionist tendencies demanded they try again. In 2000, they began excavating rocks in the soil, digging four feet deeper to get down to the rich soil that defines Napa Valley. They then replanted 70 acres on the 4,000-acre property with only the finest selects of the vines.

On May 1, 2010, the team was ready to introduce Kenzo Estate Winery, which features 20,000 square feet of caves. A visit to Kenzo is by appointment only, so the dream team designed the tasting room as a place where guests can come to recharge after a 40-minute walking tour. "A lot of the

wineries in Napa are beautifully structured, like old castles," says Tsujimoto, "but we wanted to create something that would be more interactive." The California-barn-style architecture of the tasting room even includes 60-feet of outdoor patio space that features a demonstration vineyard where visitors can walk around and pick grapes off of the vine for sampling. "It's like you're attached to the vineyard instead of being inside of a tasting room and removed from the vineyard," he says. "We wanted to create more of a full interactive experience, so guests spend some time instead of just tasting and moving on to the next vineyard."

The tasting menu certainly provides reason to stick around. Kenzo Estate is the only Napa Valley winery with a Chef Thomas Keller tasting menu, and guests have three pairing options, including a cheese plate and a full lunch with dishes like salmon rillettes and croque madame. Adding Keller's cuisine is not a simple marketing ploy; it's the result of a deep friendship Tsujimoto developed with the renowned chef over the past two decades. "I purchased this land more than 20 years ago, so

I've been going to The French Laundry for that long, getting to know Thomas and becoming such close friends," Tsujimoto explains. "About three years ago, I invited Thomas over to Japan and gave him a tour. We went to all the great restaurants because Thomas had a strong interest in Japanese food."

Kenzo Estate wines include the signature Rindo, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot (\$75 for a bottle). The 2006 Rindo is currently available; the 2007 vintage will be released in fall 2010. There is also a Murasaki, a Bordeaux-style proprietary red blend; Ai, a Cabernet Sauvignon, and Asatsuyu, a Bordeaux-style Sauvignon Blanc. These wines are available, of course, in the tasting room, and also to winery members and at select restaurants throughout California. A rosé wine is in the works, and it will be available for tasting or purchase at the winery. ■

KENZO ESTATE
TASTING BY RESERVATION ONLY
3200 MONTICELLO RD., NAPA
707.259.5408
WWW.KENZOESTATE.COM