

Japanese Videogame CEO Opens \$100 Million Napa Winery



Kenzo Tsujimoto of Capcom offers wines by Heidi Barrett and David Abreu, tasting menu from Thomas Keller

Recession? What recession? Defying tough economic times, the CEO of Japan-based videogame publisher Capcom Co. has opened a Napa Valley winery after 20 years of preparation and \$100 million of investment. Kenzo Estate, named for owner Kenzo Tsujimoto, opened to the public May 1. Visitors will be treated to wine and food from a roster of Napa all-stars. The wines are a collaboration between consulting winemaker Heidi Barrett of Screaming Eagle, Grace Family and Dalla Valle fame and vineyard manager David Abreu, who has worked with wineries such as Araujo, Colgin and Bryant. The tasting room offers the chance to pair the wines with food created by the French Laundry's Thomas Keller while sitting in a building designed by prominent winery architect Howard Backen.

Kenzo, whose company is best known for the Resident Evil and Street Fighter game series, purchased the 4,000-acre estate on Mt. George, on the east side of Napa Valley, in 1990. At the time, it was an Olympic equestrian training center. Vineyard planting began in 2002. There are currently 70 acres planted, and another 30 being planted. With vineyards on less than 2 percent of the property, the estate has the feel of a remote nature preserve.

Through an interpreter, Kenzo explained to *Wine Spectator* that when he first purchased the property, he was not planning on building a winery. But as he became aware of the potential of Napa Valley wines, he changed his mind. In Japan, he was able to purchase Napa's Opus One, and while traveling he began to try other California Cabernets, and liked how they tasted.

There are four wines, all estate-grown: Rindo, a proprietary Cabernet blend (\$75); a Cabernet Sauvignon called Ai (\$150), another Cabernet-based blend called Murasaki (\$150), and a Sauvignon Blanc called Asatsuyu (\$60). The debut 2005 vintage was almost entirely sold in Japan, and the current 2006 vintage reds are being served at the winery. None of the wines have been reviewed yet by *Wine Spectator*.

Despite the fancy setting, general manager Michael Terrien points out that other projects with the same winemaking team would have been sold at a much higher price tag. "Kenzo has reset the price of luxury in Napa Valley to suit the post-recession," he said. "Rindo, the \$75 Bordeaux blend, has no comparable price competitor in the portfolio of wines produced by David or Heidi."

Tastings are by reservation only. There are three different tastings available: \$30 for four 1-ounce pours, \$50 for four 2-ounce pours with cheese, and for \$60, guests can have a wine-paired lunch with choices from Thomas Keller's Bouchon restaurant.

The winery features architect Backen's California barn style in modern earth tones, surrounded by 150-year-old olive trees. There are a couple of Japanese details that set Kenzo apart—all the reds are named after some of the 50 variations of the word "purple" in Japanese—Tsujiimoto explained that it's not only a reference to the grapes or the wine, but that purple was the traditional color of Japanese royalty.

Kenzo reports that he has a cellar of 10,000 bottles at his home in Japan. "I have 10,000 wines to try, but I only drink my wine," he said with a grin.