

## Wine is no game for Capcom boss



**Extra life:** The Kenzo Estate in California's Napa Valley is home to the winemaking side business of Kenzo Tsujimoto (left), whose day job is as CEO of Japanese video-games giant Capcom.

Hurricane-kicking its way onto the wine scene in 2009 was a new brand, Kenzo Estate, owned by the CEO of video-game giant Capcom. Clearly playing to win, Kenzo Tsujimoto hired California's brightest wine talents to create a wine for the Japanese market that combines value for money with excellent quality. Made on his stunningly beautiful estate deep in the heart of California's Napa Valley, Kenzo Estate is a labor of love that took over a decade to come to fruition.

To find out more, I met up with Tsujimoto at Kenzo Estate Winery, his wine bar in Minami-Azabu. Despite being the head of an internationally successful company, known worldwide for game series such as "Street Fighter," "Resident Evil" and "Monster Hunter," when it comes to wine, Tsujimoto has a refreshing humility. Rather than impose his vision on the brand, he leaves the important decisions to his vineyard manager, David Abreu, and winemaker Heidi



Barrett.

His choice is a wise one: Both Barrett and Abreu are responsible for some of California's most successful cult wines — Barrett's 1992 and '93 vintages of Screaming Eagle each earned 100 points from the notoriously hard to please palate of world-class wine guru Robert Parker. "If you're after the person who makes the best Californian wine, it's Heidi Barrett," Tsujimoto enthuses.

Though Tsujimoto doesn't consider himself a winemaker, he has been in the enviable position of being able to develop his palate over the years by trying out some of the world's best wines.

"Before making our company's wine, I bought about 10,000 bottles of wine from all over the world," he says. "French and Californian wines were included in the mix. I bought the most famous and the finest. I tasted a wide variety from all over the world; I compared them all in order to create the very best wine. And, more important than my personal opinion, I paid attention to whether the wine was 'tasty' or not."

After refining his palate, Tsujimoto now confines himself to only drinking his own wines, about which he's very enthusiastic. I ask him how the reaction has been in Japan to the brand.

"It's been very good — that's because it's the best in the world," he says. Though humble about his own talents, he's not above a bit of hubris when it comes to his estate's wines. After all, he's waited years to get to this point and it's been a long and difficult road.

One of the toughest times came after he brought in Abreu as vineyard manager at the turn of the millennium. Abreu told Tsujimoto that if he wanted to create a top-quality drop, the existing vines that had been planted would not suffice.

"If I was to be part of this, I told Kenzo that in order to have a world-class vineyard I would want to take (the vines) out and redo the whole thing," says Abreu over the phone from the estate.

Though disappointed, Tsujimoto was prepared to make the sacrifice and trust in the talent he'd hired. "What kind of wine we make is his decision," says Tsujimoto. "I leave it all to him."

Though he saw problems with the previous vines, including poor drainage and questionable rootstock, Abreu also saw huge potential.

"I started with Kenzo Estate approximately in the year of 2000. The soil on the property was definitely soil to grow Cabernet at the highest level, along with the blends of Cabernet Franc and Merlot and Verdot. The soil was very, very attractive, and that's really what caught my eye right from the start," continues Abreu.

Now these "newly planted" vines are around 8 years old and are reaching a maturity in which the properties of the soil are beginning to shine through.

"I feel that there's more to come from these vines," says Abreu. "When you have great soil, the richness and the complexity of fruit that comes from those soils and the climate — which is very, very important, the elevation that we're at. I still feel that the wine will get richer and richer. Into year 10, 12, 15, they'll be right in the prime of their life there."

Except for a Sauvignon Blanc called Asatsuyu (morning dew), all the Kenzo wines are red, Bordeaux-style blends of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot. Though the subtle and fresh Sauvignon is tailored to the Japanese palate (it's a good match for sushi), the other wines also sell well in Japan. Such was the interest here that when the special-edition box set of the first vintage of Rindo 2005 went on sale in 2009, it promptly sold out.

Compared with other Bordeaux-style Californian blends, the prices for Kenzo wines are relatively low. That's because Tsujimoto wanted to bring a little bit of the magic of Napa to Japan, but at an affordable price. "I've made a good wine, but if possible I'd like to produce a reasonably priced wine," he comments.

Though \$100 for the 2005 Rindo might seem rather steep, compared to the high prices that Barrett and Abreu's other wines typically fetch, it's on the cheap side.

"Wines outside of our growing region that are out there and are selling for a lot more (than our products) don't match up well (in quality with our wines), so I say hats off to Kenzo's estate here and the marketing team on what they've put together," contends Abreu.

A big part of the magic is the Kenzo Estate, which opened up to visitors in July last year. Miles away from any main roads and free from pollutants, it's a lush, green paradise.

"It's amazing; it's a very special property," says Abreu. "It has water and the forest around it and the roads that come in, you come from a mile out on the main road and you drive a mile onto this property to get to the vineyard and winery. When you get there it's just breathtaking."

*Kenzo wines can be purchased online from [www.kenzoestatestore.com](http://www.kenzoestatestore.com).*

Top destinations for monster wine hunters

The best way to taste Kenzo wines would be to visit the California estate in Mount George, Napa Valley. The 1,600-hectare estate was opened to the public for tastings last year, and at an elevation of 450 meters it's a beautiful, isolated spot comprising swathes of vineyards.



Visitors can try out Kenzo wines either in the tasting room or out on the patio. If you opt to sit outside, you can loll in the shade of a willow trellis or nearby mulberry tree while looking at beautiful views of 100-year-old olive groves nearby.

Tasting packages range from \$30 to \$60 and each allows you to taste a flight of the four Kenzo wines: Asatsuyu, Rindo, Murasaki and Ai (the first is a white and the other three are

red Bordeaux-style blends). The difference in the more expensive package is that you get to drink 60 ml rather than 30 and have a sandwich from posh eatery Bouchon to soak it up.

To book a tour, contact [concierge@kenzoestate.com](mailto:concierge@kenzoestate.com).

If you can't make your way to California anytime soon, you can gaze at huge black and white photographs of the estate on the walls of the Kenzo Estate Winery bar in Minami-Azabu. With windows that open out onto the street, polished wood tables and plush seating, the atmosphere of the place is bright, cosy and minimalist.

There I tried out the 2009 Asatsuyu Sauvignon Blanc (¥1,000/glass), which has a pleasant scent of pear and peach and a crisp apple bite that corresponds to the wine's faint green tint. The wine has a gentle, subtle balance of sweetness and acidity. I recommend you try it with smoked scallops and avocado (¥1,000).

For a red, I tried Rindo 2009 (¥1,500/glass), Kenzo Estate's flagship wine, which is a blend of 47.1 percent Cabernet, 26.8 percent Merlot, 24 percent Cabernet Franc and 2.1 percent Petit Verdot.

Rather on the delicate fruity side, Rindo is not yet on a par with heavy-hitting premier cru Bordeaux, but it has potential to become a serious contender in subsequent vintages. Try the reds with a succulent wagyū steak (¥1,800).

*Kenzo Estate Wine Bar, Minami-Azabu Sentore 1F, 4-12-25 Minami-Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo; (03) 3448-0555; [www.kenzoestate.jp/winery\\_tokyo](http://www.kenzoestate.jp/winery_tokyo).*