



Napa Valley's Exciting Japanese Additions



Kenzo Estate, Napa Valley

Napa Valley's food-and-wine culture, shaped in large part by European sensibilities, is getting a fresh and refreshing infusion of Asian aesthetics, in particular Japanese. Kenzo Estate Winery, perhaps the first Napa Valley winery financed with the after-school earnings of American teenage boys, and Morimoto Napa, the first West Coast restaurant established by Masaharu "Iron Chef" Morimoto, provided the stylish bookends to our visit to Napa Valley the other day.

In creating Kenzo Estate Winery some 1,500 feet up Mt. George just northeast of the city of Napa, Kenzo Tsujimoto resisted any urge he may have had to build one more ostentatious architectural monument in Napa Valley, even though money was no object. Over the past 25 years he must have made hundreds of millions of yen as the founder of Capcom Group in Japan, whose portfolio of video games includes such immensely popular titles as Street Fighter, Resident Evil, Lost Planet, Monster Hunter and Mega Man.



Kenzo Estate Tasting Patio

Instead, his cluster of winery buildings floats quietly in a sunny hollow, surrounded by rows of the most tidily pruned vines in Napa Valley, along with fiery patches of poison oak, clusters of oak trees and massive outcroppings of rock. Architecturally, the board-and-batten buildings pay subdued tribute to both the equestrian ranch that previously occupied the site and the simplicity and lightness of traditional Japanese design. The structures virtually are dwarfed by the whole point of the exercise, the surrounding vineyard, which soars like a towering green wave up the otherwise parched slopes, curling around trees, lapping against rocky inlets, stopping just short of breaking over the ridgeline.

Like a lot of successful men, Tsujimoto early in his growing affluence got smitten with the wines of Bordeaux. But he was impressed with how California wines had won a notable blind tasting against releases from Bordeaux in Paris in 1976, so in the 1980s he began to scout Napa Valley for property. In 1990 he bought these 4,000 acres and planted 100 acres to vines. Then he began to recruit several of the valley's viticultural, enological and culinary superstars to help him realize his vision. One, vineyard developer David Abreu, tore out both the first vineyard and the three feet of topsoil under it, and started to replant vines. Today, the vineyard is up to 70 acres in strictly Bordeaux varieties.



Old Books and Bottles, Kenzo Estate

To make his wines, Tsujimoto brought in consulting winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett (Screaming Eagle, Dalle Valle, Grace Family, Amuse Bouche). To judge by a tasting of the winery's current releases, he directed her to make the reds in a style more suggestive of traditional Bordeaux than contemporary California. (The sauvignon blanc, on the other hand, is decidedly Californian - ripe, toasty, fleshy, a cocktail wine to sip while standing and strolling rather than sitting and eating, which is how they use it at Kenzo Estate - to welcome and accompany visitors during a tour of the grounds, the caves and the fermentation room with its throwback concrete fermenters.)

The three flagship reds, while effusive with fruit suggestive mostly of cherries and berries, lean more to Bordeaux than California in their lean and angular builds, mineral tones, reserved oak and firm tannins. Each comes in at 14.8 percent alcohol, high by Bordeaux standards but not out of line for the authority of these releases. They are wines of balance, refinement, serene tension and understated complexity, much like the estate itself. Each bears a proprietary name in Japanese; the cabernet sauvignon is "Ai," or "indigo," for the similarities between winemaking and the Japanese art of creating indigo dye, while one of the two Bordeaux-inspired blends is "Murasaki," or "purple." They aren't inexpensive wines, ranging in price from \$60 for the sauvignon blanc to \$150 for both the Ai and the Murasaki.

Tsujimoto appears in no hurry to sell the wines, at least in Napa Valley. Eighty percent of his production is exported to Japan, and visitors to the estate are limited to just how many bottles they can buy (four of the sauvignon blanc, two each of the Ai and Murasaki). Why he opens the estate to the public daily is something of a mystery, but it's a gracious gesture. The staff is attentive but so low-key in their sales pitch you have to wonder if they've been directed to avoid selling the wines if at all possible. Guests can order food prepared by Thomas Keller's Yountville restaurant Bouchon. And the setting is exceptionally scenic and relaxing. A visit isn't inexpensive, with the basic tasting costing \$30 per person and a wine-paired luncheon costing \$60 per person, but given the artful layout and the civil reception, it's a retreat as soothing to the soul as it is intriguing to the palate.