



Winemaker grows name in hidden corner of Napa

SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) — Kenzo Tsujimoto, a Japanese video game magnate who aims to build a premium wine brand in Napa Valley wine country, comes across as an easy-going man who likes to crack a joke or two.

At 71, Kenzo, speaking through a translator, jokes that he only drinks his own wine because it “doesn’t give him a hangover.” And since his wines aren’t cheap, even he is “going to need a raise.”

Joking aside, Kenzo, well-known in Japan as the chairman and CEO of Capcom Entertainment Inc. [/quotes/zigman/200796 JP:9697 -1.69%](#) [/quotes/zigman/200803 CCOEF +0.77%](#), the video game maker behind billion-dollar titles such as “Street Fighter” and “Resident Evil,” is on a mission to produce top-flight wines in a California-Bordeaux style, using a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot. He also makes a Sauvignon Blanc and a Rose.



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He’s pursuing that aim in Wild Horse Valley, the smallest and most obscure of Napa Valley’s 15 American Viticulture Areas.

It's a move that positions Kenzo's wines as the future expression of an area that's always been better known to Napa Valley locals for its horse trails than for any signature wines. Wild Horse Valley, known for decades as home to a large horse and cattle ranch, and one-time training site for the U.S. Equestrian Team, has produced limited quantities of wine since it became an AVA in 1988.

Kenzo opened his winery, set atop the eastern hills above the Napa Valley, in July 2010. He said it's possible his total investment could reach \$200 million over the next 10 to 15 years for his 4,000 acre property, which is four times the size of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park and one of the largest contiguous pieces of privately owned land in Napa County.

He's spent roughly \$100 million so far, hiring a dream winemaking team and pumping millions of dollars into an elegantly designed wine facility.

"They've gone about developing the brand with great seriousness and care," said Karen MacNeil, author of the popular "Wine Bible" book who lives in Napa Valley and teaches wine courses. "We'll have to see few vintages before we really know" how good the wine will be.

Not just another tycoon

While it would be tempting to peg Kenzo as just another tycoon that's come to California's wine country to make a cult Cabernet and wow folks with a trophy property, it's not that clear cut.

He and his company Capcom originally purchased the property in 1990 with a vague game plan to develop a resort. That didn't pan out, and Kenzo acquired the property himself in the mid-1990s. It was only after some people approached him about wanting to plant vines there that he saw the potential for a vineyard. According to people who work for him, he's not in the wine business for a quick buck or for egotistical ends.

"He's not in it for the short term. That's admirable. A lot of newcomers want it right now," said Kenzo's wine-making consultant, Heidi Peterson Barrett, who's made wine for three decades in Napa. "He's very thorough. He's not in a hurry."

Kenzo does things his way. He launched his first vintage in September 2008. That was right around the time Lehman Bros. was going in the tank and the global financial system was melting down — not exactly the time to be launching a high-end wine brand. His brand campaign is unique.

In egoless fashion, there's no mention of Kenzo Estate on the front of the bottle. Rather there's a Japanese phrase that is symbolic of the wine.

And he has a fine appreciation for detail. For his first-ever shipment to club members, Kenzo called on his wife Natsuko to hire Japanese house wives to wrap each bottle in a traditional piece of Japanese cloth called Rothki.

A man who keeps a 10,000-bottle cellar of fine wines from around the world, Kenzo wants his wine to make it into the cult-Cab status club.

“I believe I have achieved that in Japan, but in the United States, it’s yet to come,” he said.

Building an American fan base

Kenzo Estate is certainly in its own orbit on the wine map.

The winery and vineyards are nestled deep in a small valley filled with oak trees, about 1,500 feet above Napa’s Cabernet-famous valley floor and far from the weekend bustle of people hitting wineries up and down State Route 29, the county’s main artery, where Robert Mondavi and Beringer reside.

To drink the wine at Kenzo, you have to get well on your way to crossing over the Vaca Mountain range into neighboring Solano County.

The tasting room is almost a mile off Monticello Road, past a lake and some picnic tables, two gated entrances etched with the “KE” monogram, and in the middle of the rolling hills of the vineyard.

This dreamy solitude is where Kenzo is trying to separate his \$60 to \$150 wines from many top Napa producers.