

NORTHBAY biz



Kenzo Estate

By Alexandra Russell

Exclusive. As in: buzz-generating wine, produced by an in-demand freelance winemaker, available only sparingly; or a secluded, mountaintop location accessible only by appointment. Welcome to Kenzo Estate.

The long driveway After being buzzed through the gate near the top of Mt. George, a freshly paved, mile-long driveway winds smoothly through dense brush and wilderness. About two-thirds of the way in, a second gate glides open and vineyards stretch out—lush, green and expertly tended—in sharp contrast to the untamed approach thus far.

“Outside the winery and vineyards, Kenzo really wants to preserve the beauty of the property in its natural state,” says Ashley Meeker, hospitality director. “The vineyard itself is encompassed in deer fencing, and outside of that, it’s been left the way it’s always been.”

The winery is designed simply, with clean lines and exaggerated height. Weathered wood and native stone blend harmoniously into the surroundings. Inside the tasting room, the simplicity of presentation continues with muted tones, lots of natural light and a hushed, intimate vibe.

A few at a time

“We only welcome a few people at a time, because we want to make the experience as personal as possible,” says Meeker. “They’ll taste through the wines [there are three different options] and then usually order a glass to enjoy with their food.” (A small menu of lunch and dessert items are prepared at Bouchon, Chef Thomas Keller’s Yountville eatery, and delivered to the winery each morning; some items must be ordered in advance.)

DID YOU KNOW?

As a young girl, consulting winemaker Heidi Barrett frequently rode horses on the property that’s now Kenzo Estate.

A quick look around tells you why so many choose to linger: The tasting room opens to comfortable outdoor seating areas, the larger of which is adjacent to a young demonstration vineyard. On the morning we visited, the sun had just broken through dense fog, and native flowers planted along the walkways buzzed with a flurry of bees and other pollinators. Hawks soared overhead, and it was naturally peaceful.

A brief tour through the winery facility and 20,000 square feet of caves, filled us in on the history of the property (a former horse ranch), the winemaking process and, most important, the vision of the winery’s founder and namesake.

Who is Kenzo?

Kenzo Tsujimoto, CEO and founder of Japan’s Capcom Group (among the world’s top video game producers), bought this 4,000-acre property at the top of Napa’s Mt. George in 1990. “He’s always been a wine collector, and he’s particularly a fan of the Napa Valley,” says Meeker.

He still lives in Japan, but Tsujimoto has a house on the property and settles in for a month or so a few times per year. “He’s really interested and in-tune with what’s going on here,” says Meeker.

“When he first bought the property, everyone told him the site wasn’t conducive to growing grapes,” says Meeker. “But after studying the property, conducting soil analysis, and then working with [consulting winemaker] Heidi [Barrett] and [vineyard manager] David [Abreu], they’ve shown otherwise.”

Today, 70 acres are planted and producing fruit (Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec), and another 30 acres are being planted. All the fruit is used in Kenzo Estate wines.

East meets west

Kenzo Estate annually produces between 5,000 and 6,000 cases total of four wines—and almost 90 percent is sold in Japan. The

At a Glance

KENZO ESTATE
3200 MONTICELLO ROAD
NAPA, CA 94558
(877) 977-7704
WWW.KENZOESTATE.COM

Hours: *Tours daily at 10:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m.*

Tasting Fees: *\$30 to \$60*

Wines currently offered: *Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon and two red blends*

Appointment necessary: *Yes*

Food pairings: *Yes (\$6.75 to \$19.75 per item)*

Picnics: *No*

most popular wine is Asatsuyu (“morning dew”), a delicious, Bordeaux-style Sauvignon Blanc that’s named for the moisture that settles on the property overnight. “In Japan, the demand for Sauvignon Blanc is very strong,” says Hiro Nishida, director of marketing and branding. “Last year, we sold out in seven months.”

Meeker calls Rindo, a red blend named for a violet Japanese bell flower, “the flagship wine of Kenzo Estate.” It’s a “roughly 30/30/30 blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot that’s then hit with just a little Petit Verdot.” Murasaki (“purple”) is a proprietary blend of primarily Cabernet Sauvignon, with Cabernet Franc, Merlot and a “tiny bit” of Petit Verdot.

Finally, there’s Ai, Kenzo Estate’s Cabernet Sauvignon offering. “It’s a lifelong pursuit for Japanese artists to create the perfect indigo color ink or dye, called Ai,” explains Meeker. “This is predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon blended with a small amount of our other Bordeaux varietals.”

Domestically, Kenzo Estate wine is exclusively available at the winery, through the website or at the handful of California restaurants that carry it. There are also no plans for a wine club. ■