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Kenzo: A New Name in the Napa Valley Wine World



Kenzo Tsujimoto and a view of his vineyards in Napa Valley.

By J.K. Yamamoto

NAPA—Northern California has its share of sake breweries, but one Japanese name in Napa Valley — Kenzo Estate — represents fine wines.

Kenzo Tsujimoto is widely known in the video game world as the founder and chairman of Capcom ("Mega Man," "Street Fighter," "Resident Evil"). He is now on his way to becoming a major figure in winemaking as well.

Located at 3200 Monticello Road in Napa on the slopes of Mt. George, Kenzo Estate's winery and tasting room opened to the public in May. The estate covers 4,000 acres (almost four times the size of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park), 70 of which are used for vineyards. Most of the land has been kept in its natural state.

His interest in California wine dates back to the 1976 "Judgment of Paris," a competition in which French judges chose California-made chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon wines over their French counterparts after a blind tasting. That milestone was depicted in the movie "Bottle Shock."

Tsujimoto recently sat down for an interview at his estate with Yuki Baba serving as interpreter. On the question of which wine is better, he said that although he has read a lot on the subject, he only believes what he feels, and having done his own taste tests, he's concluded that "the best wine from Napa Valley is really the best."

It was not his lifelong goal to start his own winery, but when he acquired the property in 1990, "it happened to be a property that could produce the very best wine," he said, noting that the best wineries "are very small in terms of production ... but they grow the grapes very carefully and meticulously, and that creates the very best wine. And I realized that I can actually do that on this property."

Favorable factors include the elevation (1,550 feet), the

cooler climate, the purity of the air and superior soil.

The winery had to be created from the ground up, as the site was previously an equestrian center. "It was actually very well-known. It was used for the U.S. Olympic team," Tsujimoto noted.

His task was "hiring the people who would be able to create a very, very good product. It's a very similar business practice as ... video game production. I've been doing it for 40 years, and the basic principle is the same in terms of partnering up with very, very good creators."

The Kenzo Estate team includes consulting winemaker Heidi Barrett, vineyard manager David Abreu, chef Thomas Keller of Bouchon restaurant, and Wine Country architects Backen Gillam.

Tsujimoto added, "The farming and the agriculture here is very high-level, and that's not something that you can find in the other areas in the world. So I feel very lucky that we would be able to take advantage of that high-level labor force here."

Kenzo Estate wines have been sold in Japan for three years. "That's primarily because we know the market so much better than the other areas," he explained. "And in marketing, what we are emphasizing is to have people drink it. We don't really care too much about a grade or reviewers' scores or things like that. What we really focus on is to have customers drink it and then hopefully they'll really like our product. It's been doing well in Japan. The sales have been growing about 200 percent compared to previous years."

"So now we've started marketing in the U.S. market and we have this winery here, so we're going to be focusing on the effort to have people come over here and taste our wines ... Probably about 90 percent of our sales are designated to the U.S. and the Japan market."

He feels that interest in wine is growing in Japan, particularly among those who

drink some wine. "They are learning a lot; they are really studying about wine. Some people go out of their way to actually get certified to be a sommelier. Especially the younger woman population is very knowledgeable about wines." At the same time, he thinks that relying too much on written sources may cause wine drinkers to form preconceptions before they actually try a new variety.

Wines with a Japanese Quality

Rindo, the signature wine from Kenzo Estate, is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. The name refers to a Japanese bellflower that blooms in fall around the same time as harvest at the winery.

The other wines have Japanese names as well. Murasaki is a Bordeaux-style proprietary red blend consisting of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot; Ai is a Cabernet Sauvignon; and Asatsuyu is a Bordeaux-style Sauvignon Blanc.

Tsujimoto discussed the origin of these names: "It's not like there's any actual ingredients in the wine from Japan ... It actually took a very long time

wine-making, and obviously the color of the skin is purple. And the color purple in Japanese society is considered to be very high-status, and there actually are 95 different words to express the color purple in Japanese. So I picked two of them from there, Ai And Murasaki. In terms of Asatsuyu, when I go out to the vineyard in the morning, I see this very beautiful morning dew on the grapes, and I decided to use that for Sauvignon Blanc. So that's sort of like a sentiment that a Japanese person wanted to express, in terms of things that are beautiful, onto the wine."

The wine-themed movie "Sideways" inspired a Japanese remake that was filmed in the Napa and Sonoma region. Tsujimoto was not familiar with that film, but commented. "In terms of bringing people over here, probably it will take more than just watching a movie ... It will be pretty expensive to come over here from Japan, so the people would have to have a pretty serious interest in wine ... But one thing about Japanese people is that they are very, very particular about beverages. The reason is because Japanese people are very used to drinking very good water ...



to decide on the names. We tried to come up with English names, but could not come up with really appealing names in English, so we started thinking about Japanese names.

"So for the grapes, the skin part is very important for the

And over here the water that we use is very pure water from this property, and that is one of the reasons we can create a very good wine here, which I hope that Japanese people will be able to appreciate ...

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“Napa really does produce as good or even better wines than many of the French wineries, and a lot of Japanese people are beginning to realize that these days.”

He said he understands the thinking behind agriculture in Japan, which “has improved a great deal in past years, not in terms of production volume but quality,” resulting in some rather expensive produce — Ruby Red grapes that cost about \$100 a bunch and pears that cost \$20 to \$30 each. “You can really shoot for higher and higher quality ... So the society is not really so much looking for just to be fed, but the people are really looking for food to really, really enjoy. Wine is the same too. You can really shoot for quality. It’s almost limitless ... That’s what we’re going to be shooting for as well, a really high-quality agricultural product.”

(Unlike the \$100 grapes, Kenzo Estate says, “At \$75 per bottle, there is no other wine at its price point that approaches Rindo’s quality.”)

The winery, whose opening received favorable reviews from the local press, is

open daily for tastings by appointment. Tsujimoto observed that wineries are unique among farming sites because “people probably don’t want to go see a potato field or vegetable field, but for some reason wineries have sort of this special feel to them, so some people come to actually have weddings and things like that. So that’s sort of like a special place for people to visit.”

Despite all the time and effort he’s invested in this project, he said, “The video game business is my full-time occupation and the wine business I do with my extra spare time. It’s limited time that I can be here and do the wine business, but even when I’m here I have the video conference system, so I’ll be able to communicate with people in Japan or Europe or wherever in the world to conduct business from here. I assumed the position of CEO of Capcom, and that comes with a lot of responsibility ... As long as I’m CEO, I will have to designate 100 percent of my effort to the Capcom business.”

While Tsujimoto may not be on hand to personally greet them, visitors are welcome. For more information, call (707) 259-5408 or visit www.kenzoestate.com.