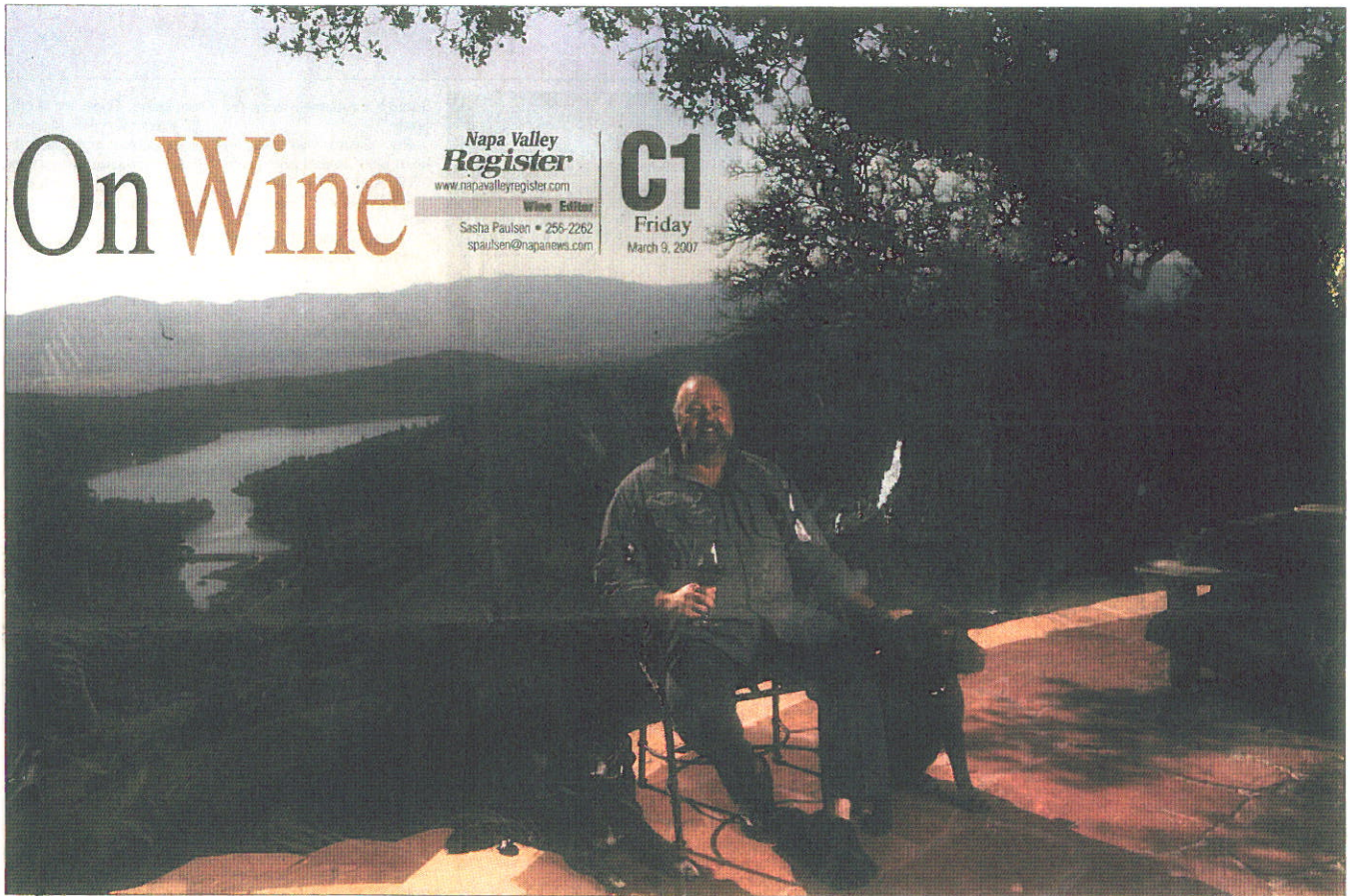


the Napa Valley Register



Relaxing with Panchita and Pilot, Pat Kuleto, owner of Kuleto Estate, is all smiles with the view he has from his 761-acre ranch high above Lake Hennessey.

Living the high life

Pat Kuleto's having fun. Happiest when he's got more than one iron in the fire, the 61-year-old wine country resident is busy getting three new Bay Area restaurants up and running as well as finally seeing black ink on the books in the Napa Valley wine operation that bears his name.

When he's not caught up in his workaday world, you'll find Kuleto spending time with his 10-year-old son, Daniel, or quite possibly checking out Mother Nature's marvels in the outback, near and far.

Averse to naysayers, Kuleto's a can-do man who's built and operated more restaurants than peers could shake a

stick at. Carving a wine estate out of backcountry wilderness is just the latest in a long list of amazing accomplishments.

Not everything goes according to plan, he readily admits, as some restaurant partnerships have splintered along the way. A passion for Italy's brunellos had to be tempered when Kuleto realized American consumers were not as hot up about sangiovese as he is.

Nevertheless, the focus is always upbeat when you're around Pat Kuleto. You have only to lock onto his ingratiating smile to catch Kuleto fever.

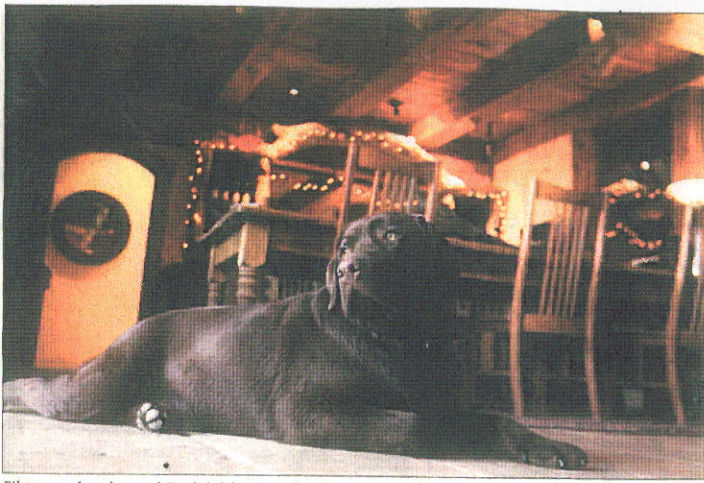
It's that drive and spunk that has made Pat Kuleto one of the most suc-

cessful entrepreneurs in California, if not the nation.

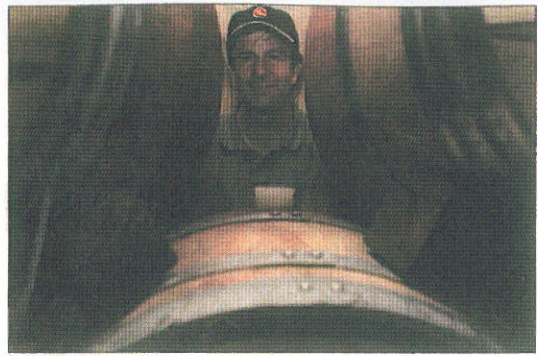
You might say his romance with all things culinary began at age 14, when Kuleto got a job as restaurant dishwasher. By 19, he was in the front of the house, chatting up dinner guests as a waiter.

In less than five years, Kuleto took a giant leap — becoming a general contractor and designer of restaurants. It was Kuleto who built the Refectory chain from coast to coast. He erected more than 75 steakhouses around this country and Canada before his 30th

See HIGH, Page C2



Pilot — a chocolate and English lab mix — keeps watch over the Kuleto Estate tasting room.



Kuleto Estate winemaker David Lattin.

High

From Page C1

birthday.

Kuleto tends to work hard and then take considerable time off. "I sailed around the world (in the early '80s), and an cut of money... (so) I decided to come back home."

By the time he showed up on Bay Area radar, Kuleto was a seasoned restaurant design veteran. "When I got out of attention for (building) Fog City Diner (in San Francisco) in 1985, a lot of people thought I was a newcomer to the business. Fog City Diner was my 110th restaurant, actually."

But the immediate Bay Area was not his only focus. When Kuleto wanted to escape the hustle and bustle of the city, he retreated to a large spread he had in Gold Country. It was here he'd planted grapes and was making wine.

"I was really content... I thought I had it all and that I didn't have to think much about the future," he confides. But reality of the worst kind came crashing down about him in the early '90s when a wildland fire destroyed all of Kuleto's holdings — 600 acres that contained a home, guest home, winery, a half-dozen outbuildings, acres of zinfandel and cabernet vines and a two-year inventory of wine.

"I took two years off to rebuild my life," he says with a reflective gaze to hillside vineyards that now command lots of attention.

"But I had a nest egg — from the sale of McCormick and Kuleto's (restaurant in San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square) and the (fire) insurance money."

He decided he wanted to find a place where he could



Frank Stagnaro of Top It Off Bottling oversees the 2003 Kuleto Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon making its way down the production line as it gets poured, corked, labeled and boxed, all inside a mobile truck. *Jorgen Gulliksen/Register*

not only live but also grow grapes and continue to make wine. And he knew he had a lot more to say to the restaurant trade.

A wilderness paradise

Notched into the upland slopes of the Lake Hennessey watershed, Kuleto Estate Winery is not his first wine-making venture.

But it was the first time Pat Kuleto could launch a new business venture that matched his passion for Italian wine — specifically brunellos, the exceptionally long-lived, powerful red wines produced entirely from the brunello grape, a variant of sangiovese, around the town of Montalcino in southern Tuscany.

"I felt California was ready for sangiovese... (and) I didn't want to compete in the crowded cabernet sauvignon market," Kuleto notes.

"Plus, I'd found a site that I and others thought would be perfect for sangiovese."

That site turned out to be 761 acres of predominantly

undeveloped wilderness that had served as homesteads for a few valley pioneers a century ago, as well as a site where small amounts of zinfandel wine was made for consumption by those mining mercury in adjacent Pope Valley.

The steep hillside land ranges from elevations of 800 to 1,450 feet. While there are volcanic soils all around, the property Kuleto decided to buy consists of fractured sedimentary soils, ideal for growing grapes. ("It can rain 10 inches and the next day we can get out in the vineyard," says winemaker Dave Lattin.)

So Kuleto began planting vines, some pinot noir and chardonnay on the cooler lower levels of the estate, along with little cabernet sauvignon. He planted a whole ridge to sangiovese and waited for the first harvest.

"That first year, we planted

27 acres of vines and I'd say a good 20 were sangiovese," he adds.

But fellow vintners Gil Nickel, Carl Doumani and Don Carano "gently told me that I might want to consider something other than sangiovese — they thought this was such a perfect place for cabernet."

Kuleto listened. He planted a lot more cabernet sauvignon, other Bordeaux varietals for blending and also some zinfandel. But sangiovese was stuck in his craw. "He wound up with 34 acres of sangiovese — 12 different clones planted on five diverse rootstocks."

"The sangiovese was everything I expected it to be," Kuleto beams. "Even though I had to admit it was hard to grow and a difficult wine to make — and that it's a complicated wine that goes

through a rollercoaster in the bottle."

But Kuleto was soon to learn after limited releases in 1998 and 1999 that sangiovese was not easy to sell either.

"I could sell 50 cases of cabernet sauvignon for every case of sangiovese. So, we gave 30 acres of sangiovese vines a sex change."

Kuleto and his year-round vineyard crew interplanted and budded over sangiovese vines to cabernet sauvignon, syrah and zinfandel. They retained four choice acres of sangiovese in order to produce the best sangiovese possible and to use it to bring a little added acidity to other red blends.

"It was an economic move, as much as I hate to say it," Kuleto declares. "This site was right for sangiovese but it's also spectacular for cabernet, syrah and zin."

"There are 60 vineyard blocks here that cry out for certain varietals because they are so perfectly suited to them," adds winemaker Dave Lattin. "Other lots are subtler, requiring more intuition. We're the only vineyard on this entire ridge so we're discovering for ourselves the depth of what this place has to offer. It's a process of instinct and intellect. It's about responding to what the land gives you and staying open-minded as a winemaker. Pat made some amazing initial gut calls about what to plant and where. Since then, we've been learning the patterns of the land and refining our knowledge."

Today, there are 88 acres of low yielding vines bearing fruit — 60 of them cabernet

sauvignon. There are another 32 acres of vines slated to come on line in the next few years. Production is just about 8,000 cases today, with plans to grow no more than 14,000 cases down the line.

"Friends told me that it would take a long time before I'd start to see any black ink in the wine business," Kuleto admits. "Well, we're about to turn the corner this year."

From Cucina to Cove

The spectacular back country property that contains Kuleto's winery also includes his rustic, Tuscan-style home, Villa Cucina.

Both structures were built with environmental cautions in mind. Only one of the tall oaks on the home site had to be felled in order to make way for the rock and hand-hewn wood structure. Trees cut to make way for vines were milled for both buildings. As the site has very little rock, 800 tons of boulders were carted up the hillside from adjacent rocky sites, such as Pritchard Hill.

Designed by Kuleto, both home and winery take advantage of the rugged landscape. Designed around a central kitchen hearth, the home sets the tone for surrounding ranch and vineyards. Blending early California craftsman and pastoral Mediterranean styles, both home and winery bring into focus Kuleto's penchant for natural materials, custom craftsmanship and spectacular lighting. The home sits just back, from a cliff that overlooks Lake Hennessey and the towns of Rutherford and St. Helena. The custom-built

See HIGH, Page C2

High

From Page C2

17,000 square foot gravity flow winery is a prime example of state-of-the-art technology blended with old world charm.

The estate has grown to include extensive orchards, gardens and a working ranch with sheep, fowl and cattle, with all manner of fish available from a small body of fresh water, appropriately named Lake Brunello.

In addition to Martini House in St. Helena, Kuleto owns and operates three San Francisco restaurants — Boulevard (with chef/partner Nancy Oakes), Jardiniere (with chef/partner Traci Des Jardins) and Farallon (with chef/partner Mark Franz).

He's planning to open eco-lodge/resort, Nick's Cove, in Marshall this coming May. It's a luxury inn with beach, pier and boating cove on the Sonoma coast. And, of course, a restaurant that will feature the fruits of the sea.

Not only that, Kuleto has the honor of erecting the first

buildings (save for PacBell Park) on San Francisco's waterfront in more than a century. The two free-standing buildings — at 10,000 square feet each — adjacent to the Ferry Building house two new restaurants, Waterbar (where executive chef Mark Franz will feature Pacific seafood) and Epic Roast House (where chef Jan Birnbaum, formerly of Calistoga's Catahoula, will specialize in fare for meat eaters). Both restaurants are slated to open in October.

"I can't wait," Kuleto says with all the glee of a school kid.