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Cult Leader

INTRODUCING
THE LATEST MUST-HAVE
MERLOT. BELIEVE (OR
DON'T BELIEVE) THE HYPE.
BY JORDAN MACKAY



ALMOST FAMOUS?
MICHAEL POLENKE
WITH HIS 2003 MERLOT

BLACKBIRD VINEYARDS
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You've heard it before: Wealthy guy buys expensive vineyard in Napa Valley, produces small amount of expensive wine. It's the tale of Michael Polenske, the owner of Blackbird Vineyards, who was finally able to make his vinous dreams come true in 2003, after years of long hours in a lucrative financial business.

Not to say that Polenske's Merlot isn't good. In fact, if you can get hold of it, you're likely to find it delicious. But what makes a wine go from being another costly, elusive bottle to becoming a cult sensation? Blackbird is just one of a handful of wines vying for this position, but unlike, say, Hourglass and Amuse Bouche, it's a relative newcomer, which can help. If a wine has been around for a few years and hasn't made it, chances are it never will.

According to Polenske, a wine has to have three things, beyond its quality: story, packaging and scarcity. He believes that Blackbird's story lies in the history of the vineyard, whose grapes have fed wines like Robert Foley, Selene and Pride Mountain in the past. He's got a name-brand winemaker, Sarah Gott, of Joseph Phelps and Quintessa.

"We've also got great packaging," he says, without sounding immodest. "The label came out better than I expected, and even the website is striking, with its spare, simple design." And finally, he doesn't have much wine—fewer than 100 cases for his first offering. "We had a two-bottle maximum," says Polenske. "I thought it better that we have a larger audience rather than just selling it by the case, which would end up sitting around in some collector's cellar."

So far, so good. But the crucial element that Polenske forgets to mention is hype. And these days, the hype machine is bigger than ever, which works in Blackbird's favor. It used to be that a wine needed to rely only on a big score from Robert Parker or *Wine Spectator*, but these numbers aren't as critical today. Here in the Bay Area, this is partly due to the recent emergence of wine-collector services such as Vinfolio and Vintrust, high-end wine-storage companies that also broker hard-to-find bottles to their clients. Not content to passively watch the fate of wines dictated to them by national critics, these firms are working to anoint their own experts and now routinely issue their own 100-point scores by email, often before the national publications can release their ratings. Furthermore, they actually sell the wine (a potential conflict of interest that might or might not make you suspicious), so the second you get the email showing a hot new wine, you can order a few bottles.

It just so happens that Blackbird's first rating, by Vinfolio, was a heart-stopping 98 points. Behind the scenes, Polenske originally had an appointment to show his wine first to Vintrust, but Vintrust canceled, so Polenske dropped off a bottle to Vinfolio, which led them to proclaim Blackbird their top red wine of 2005, followed by the question, "Is there a better Merlot produced in America?" Needless to say, Vintrust, whose Blackbird rating came in at 95 points, would've liked to have been the first to rate it.

Polenske has had an awakening of sorts. "I was kind of naive about the press then, and now that I'm in it, I start to see all the politics between writers and sellers." If wine merchants become accepted as critics, it raises questions about how buzz is created and how it figures into ratings. But with two rival companies dueling to praise one's wine, Blackbird's not likely complaining. Though it's not a slam dunk just yet, Polenske reports that his winemaker considers the 2004 a far better wine than the 98-point-scoring 2003. There will also be 1,000 cases of it, compared with the paltry original offering. Will this be enough to send Blackbird over the top? Stay tuned. x

Other Players Blackbird may be a Merlot, but cultdom comes easily to Cabs. Here are some contenders.

Sloan Vineyards

This winery's discreet website offers nothing more than Robert Parker's near-perfect scores and a waiting-list form, making its Cab appear all the more coveted. **(\$595)**

Vineyard 29

Planted with the same Cab grapes, known as the "Grace clone," from Grace Family Vineyards, this standout from St. Helena has proven to be clearly a product of its terroir. **(\$210)**

Switchback Ridge

Those on the three-year waiting list for Switchback Ridge's current offerings will be happy to learn that production of the 2005 Cab should be twice as big. **(\$299)**

Merus

Hubby-and-wife Mark Herold and Erika Gottl produced their low-yield 2003 in the garage of their suburban Napa home. **(\$200)**
—SUSAN WILLIAMS