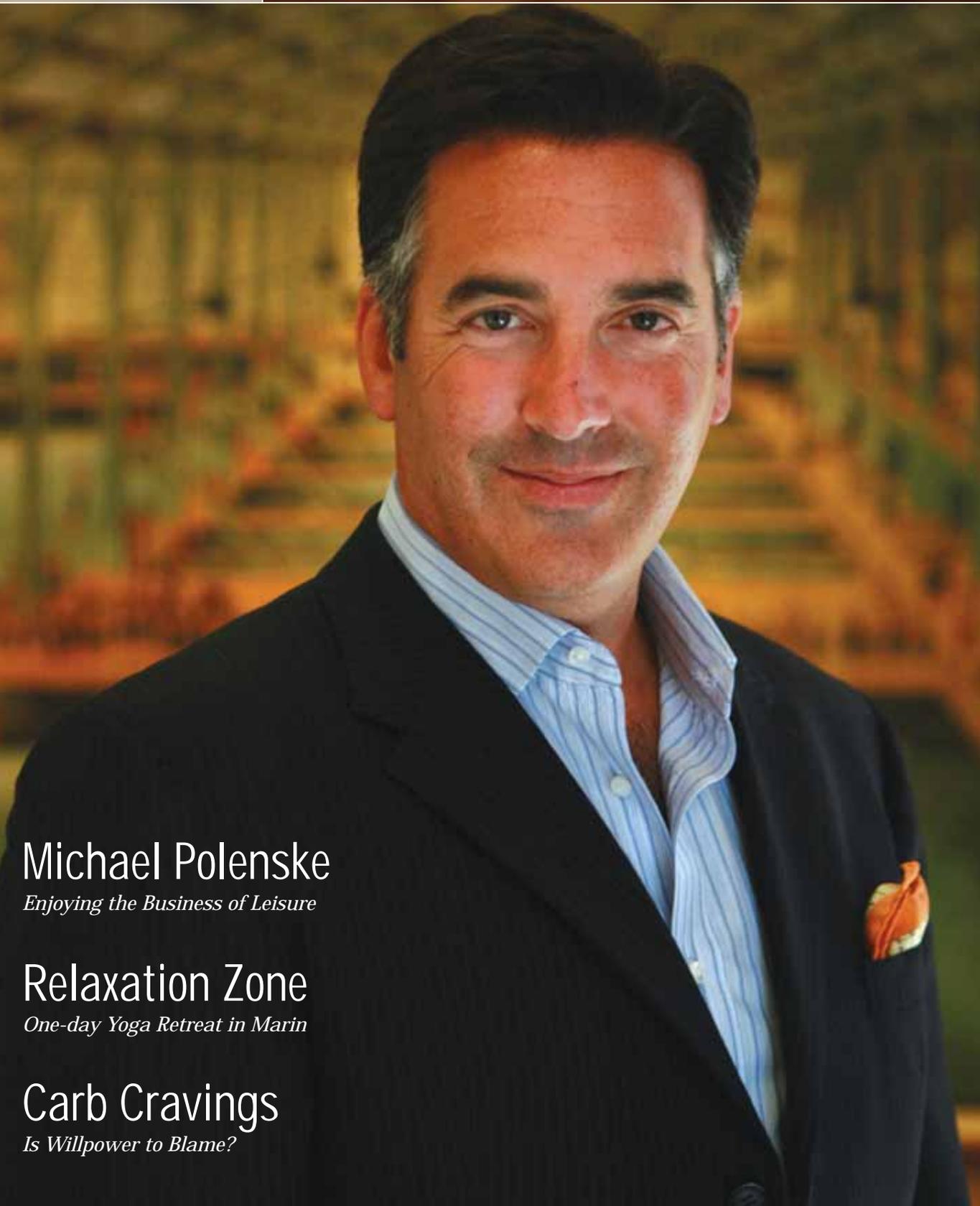


# inside

The San Francisco Bay Club  
Bay Club/Bank of America Center

A portrait of Michael Polenske, a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light blue striped shirt. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is a blurred, warm-toned landscape, possibly a vineyard or garden.

## Michael Polenske

*Enjoying the Business of Leisure*

## Relaxation Zone

*One-day Yoga Retreat in Marin*

## Carb Cravings

*Is Willpower to Blame?*

# on the COVER

By Christine Blake



Photos by Karina Marie Diaz

Michael Polenske's Blackbird Vineyards  
Merlot is the one to watch

Bay Club member Michael Polenske does more than just enjoy the good life—he creates it. This full-time investment advisor and part-time entrepreneur has fashioned a collection of lifestyle-based ventures that reflect his passion for great food and wine, and the little things that make life sweeter.

For more than 20 years, Michael has found much success by helping his clients find investments that reflect their personal interests. He tells us, “By choosing investments that have some special significance, my clients

feel more connected to the process—which is always a good thing.” And he should know. Michael has taken the same approach in his own life, discovering—and in some cases creating—business opportunities that are more than just viable, they’re ones he himself finds of great personal interest.

One such business is New York’s Soho House. Michael is one of the founding investors in this storied private club and hotel, which is perhaps best known for its rooftop swimming pool featured in *Sex and the City*. Another of his interests is San Francisco’s cutting-edge eatery, Boulettes Larder. Aptly located in the bustling Ferry Building, Boulettes is an epicurean delight devoted to organic fare by way of the emerging slow food movement. Much like Soho House, Boulettes isn’t simply creating a better product, it’s forging new ground altogether. And by offering its gourmet ingredients for the home cook, Boulettes has made slow food a little more accessible to those just outside “the know”.

Michael also has a stake in a number of other restaurants, including Taylor’s Refresher in San Francisco and St. Helena, and Terzo (see Bay Cuisine, pg 18) in the Marina District—a sister restaurant to the celebrated Rose Pistola. Additionally, he has a European art and furnishings import business he developed in response to his

own search for high quality antiques. Which leads us to his current, dare we say, all-consuming passion, Blackbird.

While searching for a summer home a few years back, Michael found more than he expected. There in Napa’s Oak Knoll District, he found a house situated on a picturesque vineyard. The opportunity to purchase such a property would fulfill his lifelong dream to work in the wine business. Michael explains, “Back in my college days, my plan was to provide financial services to the vintners of the Napa Valley, but fate has something else in mind.” Instead, Michael found himself working in the Silicon Valley in those early years, but he never entirely gave up on the idea of working in the wine industry. So when the opportunity to purchase the home and the vineyard came his way—it seemed destiny had a hand in the deal.

Blackbird Vineyards, as the property is known, has been something of a well-kept secret. For years, it had quietly supplied fruit for a number of respected wineries, including Pride Mountain Vineyards, Robert Foley Vineyards, Lail, and Vineyard 29. And in doing so, had enjoyed an enthusiastic response from those in the trade. But Michael saw more. He envisioned Blackbird producing its own ultra-premium wine, and set out to make it happen.

## BIRDS OF A FEATHER

In launching Blackbird as an ultra-premium label, Michael assembled a powerful team to fulfill his vision. Winemaker Sarah Gott has extensive experience producing noteworthy wines includes Joseph Phelps, Quintessa, and Joel Gott Wines, which she makes with her husband. Josh Clark, a second-generation wine grower tends to all vines on the property, using a sustainable farming approach. Then there’s Kelly Maher, a noted viticultural consultant who’s overseen the development of numerous vineyards in California’s north coast,

(continued on page 19)

(continued from page 3)

including Hourglass and Goldeneye, as well as projects in Australia, Argentina, France, and Brazil. Kelly works closely with both Sarah and Josh, with a focus on the science of managing the vineyards. Rounding out the team is Paul Leary, who recently took on the role of COO/CMO after a six-year tenure as vice president of marketing for the St. Helena-based, Duckhorn Wine Company.

### A FLYING START

His dream team in place, Michael set out to produce Blackbird's first-ever wine, and hit one out of the park his first time at bat. Blackbird's inaugural

(2003) vintage Merlot was an immediate success. The small first offering—less 100 cases—managed to catch the eye of both Vinfolio and Vintrust, garnering an astounding 98 and 95 points respectively. Beginner's luck? Hardly. Even as an industry novice, Michael knew he needed strategy to make it in the super competitive ultra-premium market. He tells us, "It's not enough to have a quality product. People want a back story, a history—and Blackbird has all that." He adds, "An interesting label doesn't hurt either!" Truly, the distinctive label with its minimalist imagery and

color palette is striking indeed. For this Michael partnered with noted designer David Hughes, whose work includes logos and packaging for the likes of Napa's French Laundry and the Sundance Film Festival, as well as New York City's renowned Takashimaya department store. Together the two pondered the fate of more than 20 different designs before deciding on the final concept. Michael became engrossed in the process and admits, "I'm really proud of the label design. It's every bit of what I hoped for!"

Michael has learned quite a bit about wine production in short order, and he's confident that his early success is only the beginning. But this isn't braggadocio. Michael has done his homework, and he looks to the region to seal Blackbird's future. "With the designation of Napa's fourteenth AVA less than two years ago, Oak Knoll is now well poised to bring forth the prominence and elegance of Merlot from this region," he asserts. It turns out that Oak Knoll is strikingly similar (in soil composition and microclimate) to the Pomerol region of France, which is known for its world-class Merlot. What does this mean for Blackbird? Michael explains, "Historically, the Merlot-based wines of Pomerol have challenged the first growths of Bordeaux, which certainly bodes well for us." And the French connection doesn't end there. Michael tells us that 'merlot' is actually French patois for 'little blackbird.'

### BUY, BUY BLACKBIRD

Now that your interest is piqued, don't let an opportunity to taste Blackbird Vineyards' Merlot pass you by. Their philosophy has been to honor the purchase requests of their private clients first and foremost, so the best way to secure an allocation of the soon-to-be-released 2004 vintage, is to put your name on their mailing list ([www.blackbirdvineyards.com](http://www.blackbirdvineyards.com)) before a release letter is sent late this summer.

## Best in Class



### USF Dons' Basketball

The University of San Francisco men's basketball team is looking forward to another exciting season! Capitalizing on the talents of an outstanding recruiting class, and the leadership of the returning players, Coach Jessie Evans and his staff are anticipating a season to be remembered. For those of you who are USF alumni, this is a great way to revisit the glory days of years past. And for all you new fans, it's the perfect time to join our growing community.

As a Best in Class partner, USF would like to offer members of The San Francisco Bay Club and Bay Club/Bank of America Center a 10% discount on season tickets (lower level) for the 2006–2007 Season. Mention code GODONS0607 when you call the USF Ticket Office at 415.422.2873. Go Dons!

Offer ends August 31, 2006.