

Blackbird Vineyards

Oak Knoll District, California

A THREE-WORD, HAND-SCRAWLED CHANGE IN AN EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT BOUGHT MICHAEL POLENSKE HIS DREAM VINEYARD IN NAPA VALLEY.

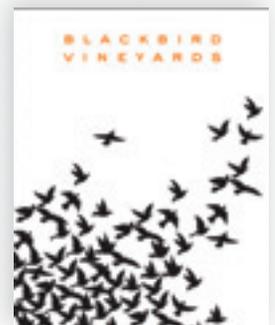


Blackbird Vineyards proprietor Michael Polenske.

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Photos by Karina Marie Diaz



Blackbird Vineyards in the Oak Knoll District (above); sorting grapes at harvest time (below).

Now, five years later, his Blackbird Vineyards is flying against the prevailing winds to prove Merlot has a place in high-end home and restaurant cellars.

Before purchasing Blackbird, Polenske was a financial adviser to high-net-worth clients. When his firm merged with another, he added three words—“change of control”—to his contract, providing for a payoff in the event of another merger. Three months later, the firm merged again and triggered the clause, providing Polenske with the liquidity for his wine venture.

Having succeeded in finance with a contrarian approach, Polenske applied the same methodology to his investment in Napa Valley. Cabernet Sauvignon was already well covered, but there were only a few players in premium Merlot. Bucking conventional wisdom, Polenske decided he would grow great Merlot in Napa.

After identifying Blackbird as a potential purchase target, Polenske reached out to sommeliers as part of his due diligence. “Everyone I talked to in the valley knew of the vineyard and the pedigree,” he says. “Virtually every pro, whether wine-



maker or sommelier, knew it.” He heard that the Oak Knoll District, where Blackbird resides, has a terroir similar to that of Pomerol, with gravel-and-clay-loam soil and cool afternoon breezes off the ocean. Appropriately enough, *merlot* is French slang for “little blackbird.”

Planted to Merlot in 1997, the 10-acre vineyard had already been selling grapes to a number of top-end producers. Mia Klein even made a vineyard-designate Merlot for Selene. After buying the property in 2003, however, Polenske began

holding back grapes to make his own wine. He recruited star consultant winemaker Sarah Gott, formerly of Joseph Phelps and Quintessa, to craft “Pomerol-inspired wines in the Napa Valley.”

Blackbird Vineyards’ first vintage, 2003, produced a mere 100 cases. This Merlot, first called Napa Valley Proprietary Red and renamed Illustration with the 2006 vintage, received exceptional reviews. In 2004 and 2005, the winery retained enough grapes to bottle roughly 1,000 cases of the signature red each year (95% and 96% Merlot, respectively). In 2005, Blackbird added 200 cases of a new 50% Merlot-50% Cabernet Franc blend called Paramour. Another premium blend with more Cabernet (called Contrarian) and a second label (called Arise) are being added with the 2006 vintage, and a rosé, Arriviste (80% Merlot-20% Cabernet Franc), is debuting with 2007. Production has now reached nearly 2,500 cases, consuming almost all the vineyard’s fruit.

The sole outside client is now Bob Foley, who uses Blackbird grapes for his own label and for Pride Mountain Vineyards. With the 2008 vintage, it’s unlikely that any of the precious berries will leave the property.

Polenske’s understanding of high-net-worth consumers drives the marketing and brand positioning of Blackbird. Along with chief operating and chief marketing officer Paul Leary, who migrated from Duckhorn Wine, he has focused on building a chain of peer-to-peer referrals (i.e., “word of mouth”). Blackbird has partnered with top-tier brands to target the affluent. Its Napa Valley Proprietary Red was the exclusive red wine at the 2007 *Vanity Fair* Oscar party. The 2005 vintage was released at a VIP dinner hosted by Chanel at Wolfgang Puck’s Cut in Beverly Hills. The winery now markets to American Express Platinum and Centurion cardholders with direct private tastings. You need sizzle to sell steak, and a crucial part of selling premium wine is the buzz factor. “You can only say, ‘has black fruit and smells like smoke’ so many times,” Polenske explains. Yet he has kept his prices well below the cult level.

Polenske’s contrarian bet on Merlot and niche marketing seem to be paying off. In general, sales of domestically produced Merlots rose 6% in 2007, according to IRI InfoScan. Most of Blackbird’s signature wines to date have sold out, almost entirely through direct sales and restaurants.

With Merlot overdue for a return to prominence, it looks like it’s time for this little Blackbird to fly. 

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Napa Valley Proprietary Red	2004	\$85
Pronounced tannins with noticeable, but balanced, acidity. Tart, with a pleasant current of dark chocolate, cacao, mocha, and tart plum, along with a touch of tobacco. Clearly a wine that will develop with age. Would benefit from decanting.		
Napa Valley Proprietary Red	2005	\$85
Dark garnet color. A throaty, supple wine with solid tannins, an attractive sour-cherry core, and well-balanced acidity. Finishes a tad hot, but not to the point of distraction.		
Illustration	2006	\$NA
86% Merlot, 9% Cabernet Franc, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon; tasted from barrel. Velvety, dark purple. Luxuriant nose of earth and fruit. Significant blackcurrant flavors emerge on the palate, accompanied by notes of blackberry, blueberry, sour red cherry, spice, pepper, and a hint of cola. A lush, full-bodied wine with excellent structure, tightly wound acidity, and a long finish.		
Arriviste Rosé	2007	\$24
80% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc. Beautiful strawberry hue, with a light, pleasant freshness on the nose. The juicy midpalate shows notes of sour-cherry soda and of grapefruit juice and pith. Crisp, dry finish with moderate minerality.		

Prices are suggested retail.

