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PROFILE *By Mandy Behbehani*



Michael Polenske, owner of Blackbird Vineyards, with his dog, Oliver, in the backyard of his Napa home.

Second career takes flight — as Napa vintner

After making his fortune teaching others how to build theirs, Michael Polenske quit the world of financial planning to pursue his dream of becoming a Napa Valley vintner. Making Merlot, no less, a wine whose sales were eviscerated by the 2004 movie "Sideways," in which the fictional wine snob Miles delivers a now-famous (and profane) rant against the varietal.

That doesn't bother Polenske, 48, who has always played long odds. (Graduating from Chico State and rising to president and CEO of Chase H & Q's private banking section in his 30s being just one of them.) His Blackbird Vineyards, like other acquisitions in his portfolio, illustrates a principle Polenske says he learned from studying his billionaire clients: Put your money only in projects that reflect your personal interests.

Thus his investments over the past 15 years in Manhattan's Soho House (whose pool was featured in television's "Sex and the City"); in a European art and furnishings import business; and in restaurants like San Francisco's Boulette's Larder, Terzo and Rose Pistola — all of which reflect his own passions for great food and art. All that was lacking was a project related to wine.

Polenske remedied that in 2003, when he acquired the 10-acre Blackbird Vineyards in the Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley, planted to Merlot in 1997.

Last year, he opened Ma(i)sonry, housed in a 1904 stone manor house in Yountville that he renovated and transformed into an art, design and wine collective featuring furniture from the likes of Ron Mann, art by Wade Hoefler and Jedd Novatt, and tastings of wines from hard-to-find, artisanal growers at communal tables in a sun-dappled courtyard. Polenske also recently acquired the I. Wolk Gallery in St. Helena, as well as the sculpture gardens located at Auberge Du Soleil in Napa Valley and MacArthur Place in Sonoma.

"Art, food, furniture, wine — these are all things that are about leisure, that give life its texture," Polenske says. "But I am not doing this as a hobby."

Instead, he says, he is working just as hard as he did (for a lot less money) when he headed J.P. Morgan's West Coast private banking business. His days are spent developing strategic partnerships to expand all his enterprises.

"My clients are about the same as when I had my day job," Polenske says. "I was lucky enough to be working with interesting people — founders of companies, CEOs, entrepre-

neurs — and a lot of those people became my wine clients. I never sat at a trading desk. It was never about the transaction. It was about developing client relationships, and quite literally, many of the things I was doing in my day job I am still doing, but now it's for my own brand."

These days, instead of waking to the quintessential San Francisco view — Alcatraz to the Golden Gate Bridge — from his top-floor flat in Pacific Heights, replete with tufted armchairs, silk valances and Oriental carpets, Polenske awakes six days a week in a modest, two-bedroom ranch house with pale wood floors, sisal rugs and a small pool that is just steps from his tranquil spread of vines. A short walk across the vineyards is Blackbird's global headquarters in another former home on the property, this one circa 1900, which is now filled with some of Polenske's personal art and furniture collections, including French leather club chairs from the 1920s and paintings by Bay Area artists Squeak Carnwath and Manuel Neri.

Instead of a crisp suit, starched collar and silk tie, he now kicks around in khakis and corduroy jackets. On a clear day, Polenske can see Mount St. Helena from his office. Always by his side is his pug, Oliver, who loves to chase the birds and rabbits and chomp on the cheese cubes his master surreptitiously slips him. After buying Blackbird and recruiting respected winemakers Sarah Gott and Aaron Pott to help him create his Pomerol-inspired Merlots, Polenske juggled his two careers for three years. In 2006, he quit the money world, partly because the financial markets seemed to be contracting while his wine business was taking





A tasting table in the sun-dappled courtyard of Ma(i)sonry.



A vignette of art and antiques at Polenske's Ma(i)sonry in Yountville, an art, design and wine collective that he opened last year.



A sitting room at Blackbird Winery offices in Napa.



flight. Since then, Polenske has seen his four core Merlot-based vintages (only limited, allocated quantities of which are available through a mailing list direct from the winery) fast becoming cult wines, snapped up by hardened oenophiles for their tables and cellars. His first vintage, in 2003, carrying the distinctive label featuring flying blackbirds, comprised just 100 cases. That Merlot was awarded 98 points out of 100 by San Francisco wine and collector services company Vinfolio, who called it “the best Merlot nobody had ever heard of.” The winery’s Illustration was the only red wine served at the 2007 Vanity Fair Oscars party, and two of Blackbird’s wines were selected to be poured at the Vanity Fair gala that kicked off the Tribeca Film Festival in April. Blackbird wines are on the list at top-flight restaurants like Spruce and in stores like Plump Jack and Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant priced from \$50 to \$90.

He is now producing 3,000 cases and says the cruel knocks of “Sideways” on Merlot were only a good thing.

“I bought the vineyard before ‘Sideways,’ but the first vintage came out after the movie, and I never saw it as anything other than a positive thing,” says Polenske, who somehow managed to secure from the DMV a personalized license plate reading FNG MRLO. (He convinced the powers that be that FNG stood for “flocking,” as in “flocking blackbirds”).

“It raised the dialogue about Merlot,

and in our letters to clients we quoted Miles,” he says, referring to the character Miles Raymond played by Paul Giamatti. “Miles wasn’t saying Merlots are bad, just that some Merlots are bad. And the irony is that his ‘I am not drinking any f—ing Merlot’ comment is meant to be the punch line in the movie, but the real punch line is that Miles’ fetish wine is Cheval Blanc, which is 50 percent Merlot.”

Polenske’s business successes may not be as serendipitous as it might first appear. Polenske, born in Bermuda to a father who was a hurricane hunter and pilot, has long been interested in wine. After his father was transferred to Travis Air

Force Base, Polenske spent most of his youth there and in Vacaville, where his mother still lives. His first experience of wine came with family trips to Wine Country.

“I couldn’t drink the wine, but I didn’t like the neighborhood we lived in, the tract houses and so on,” says Polenske. “And I remember always thinking how much more beautiful things were just over the hill.” While majoring in finance at Chico State,

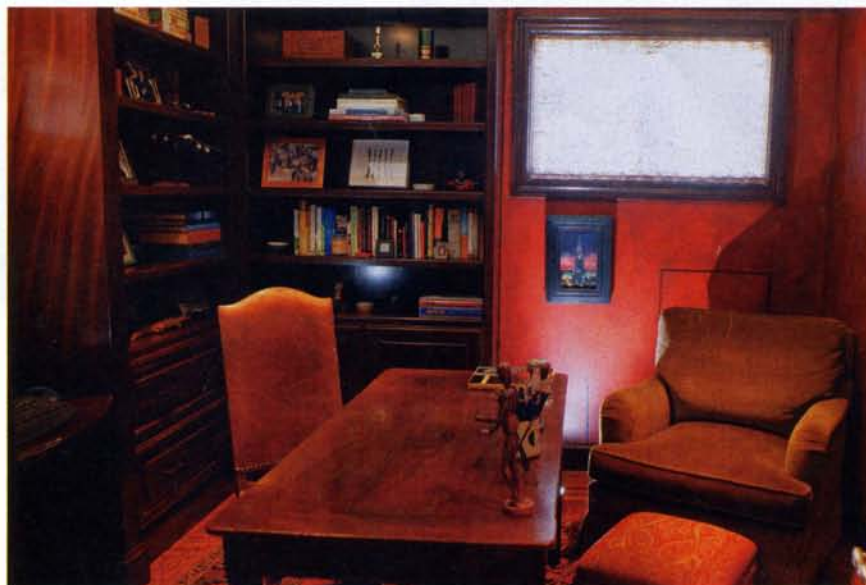
Polenske took wine classes, hoping to provide financial services to Napa Valley’s winemakers. After graduating in 1983, however, the firm he found willing to give him Napa and Sonoma as territory also assigned him to Silicon Valley, where he ended up advising the tech boom’s Internet biggies along with old Peninsula wealth. Within six months, 90 percent of his income was coming from

the 94025 ZIP code. He still thought about Napa and wine-making, but bigger and better job opportunities kept him too busy. Eventually, he decided he would settle for a house with a pool for weekends. Then he stumbled on Blackbird.

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Michael Polenske

A longtime San Francisco resident, Polenske’s life is a more casual one today. When he entertains for business, it’s at Ma(i)sonry, local restaurants or at the Napa Valley Reserve, of which he is a founding member. At home, he and his girlfriend, Kim Miller, put together casual gatherings for 10 to 15 friends poolside with a menu mostly of grill food served on simple bone china dressed up with 1766 English transferware serving dishes.



Photography by Mike Kepka

This cozy office, with deeply hued walls and wooden bookcases, serves as a quiet refuge in Polenske’s San Francisco home.

(Polenske's Tiffany Limoges china stayed in the city.) Once in a while they will host a sit-down lobster feed where lobsters and corn and other goodies are thrown onto a long communal table and everyone eats with their hands.

As a board member of Encore and Bravo — junior committees for the San Francisco Ballet and San Francisco Opera — Polenske was accustomed to attending several black-tie events a week. These days he is still philanthropically involved, but in projects like the wine-centric Auction Napa Valley and the weeklong summer fete Festival Del Sole of which he is a founding board member.

Weekends are spent doing Bikram yoga in downtown Napa, biking, walking the dogs and entertaining family. Some Saturday evenings, Polenske and Miller like to stop in at Ma(i)sonry for wine and live music and then go to dinner at Bottega, Cook or Press. Polenske now goes into San Francisco only for engagements of a personal nature.

"I love San Francisco," Polenske says. "But my purpose now is to be here. Now am I getting paid the seven figures I earned on Wall Street? No, but with the exception of a few extravagances, I always lived far beneath whatever amount I was paid. This made the transition much easier. My lifestyle hasn't changed. I still travel. I still drive the same car. None of that has changed."



Photography by Mike Kepka

An antique carved Italian headboard and fanciful linens grace the master bedroom, a decidedly more formal setting than his Napa Valley abode.