

Michael Polenske, right, outside Ma(i)sonry, his new gallery and tasting room in Yountville; An industrial-style staircase leads to more art upstairs, visible through an opening in the wall.

From city to rusticity

An uncommon meld of fine wine, home furnishings and art



IN NAPA VALLEY, where many winemakers go from profitable wine making to art collecting, Michael Polenske, the valley's most recent vintner turned gallerist, is an exception.

His interest in art began when he was a boy scout in Washington D.C. where his father, a military pilot, worked under Nixon.

"Hiking meant that we would walk from monument to monument in the National Mall," Polenske, 48, said. Along the way are some of the world's best museums. Exhibitions there "avoided by fellow scouts" thrilled Polenske.

"I looked at the things I liked and then found postcards of one or two of those objects in the museum store," he said. "I still have them in a box somewhere."

BY ZAHID SARDAR



Vintage furniture and sculptural objets are arranged in vignettes; In the sunny garden, guests can taste wine amid large wire pears by Sonoma artist Geronimo and other sculpture. Chairs and tables are by Ron Mann.



Those mementos, from a time when his family still lived in military housing, became the foundation of a valuable art collection, built during the last two decades while he was an investment banker. It includes Bay Area figurative art from the '50s and '60s and works by well-known contemporary artists such as Manuel Neri, David Park and Squeak Carnwath.

LEISURELY PURSUITS

When Polenske quit the financial world in 2006, his love of art inspired a fresh career promoting laid-back luxury punctuated by art.

"Just using my stock options on hobbies was not a choice I considered," Polenske said. The same drive that took him to the top of Chase Manhattan Bank & Trust's private banking division in the Western United States, when he was still in his 30s, propelled him in a new direction.

Taking cues from billionaire clients who invested in their personal interests, Polenske chose "the business of leisure" as his next venture. It incorporates his love of viniculture (which began when his father was transferred for a time to Travis Air Force base near the wine country), food, furniture and art.

Fortuitously, in 2003, Polenske

had acquired Blackbird Vineyard as a weekend retreat. It consisted of a century-old farm building, a modest ranch home and a small pool on 10 acres of vineyards in Oak Knoll, Napa; it now received his full attention. Polenske left his art-filled Pacific Heights San Francisco apartment with panoramic bay views to live in the country.

He hasn't regretted leaving behind the world of high-stakes investments for technology moguls, fancy china and business suits because casual rusticity has other advantages he can share with his girlfriend Kim Miller and their dog Oliver.

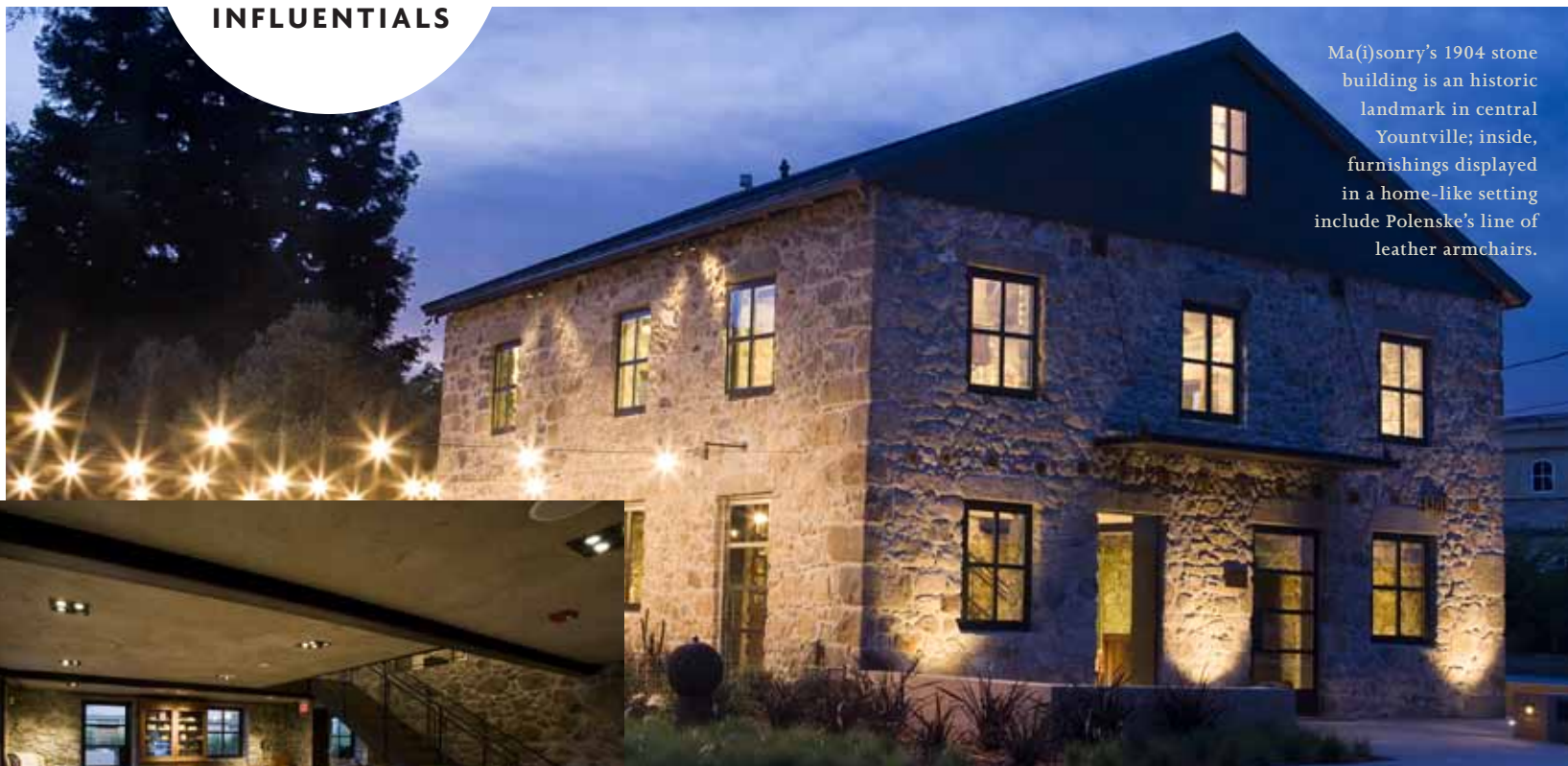
"In Napa, the quality of life is nicer and that's true luxury," he says. "Leisure and luxury no longer mean conspicuous consumption. They are about bespoke

experiences." For one thing, Polenske has a less frenetic commute. "We can open the front door and walk to the vineyards in twenty paces," he says.

TEAM PLAYER

Like a musician playing riffs before learning the tune, he is honing his acumen for 'leisure' as a business. In 2006 he invested in SoHo House, the residence club in New York. Later, in San Francisco, he invested in Boulette's Larder and other fine restaurants.

With reputed winemakers Sarah Gott and Aaron Pott both of Quintessa winery fame, he released Blackbird's 2003 merlot (which previously went to other wineries) under his own distinctive flying blackbirds label and went on to win awards against some of



Ma(i)sonry's 1904 stone building is an historic landmark in central Yountville; inside, furnishings displayed in a home-like setting include Polenske's line of leather armchairs.



the best Pomerol-style French wines. Subscribers and the best restaurants around the country quickly snapped up each new release.

Along the way he teamed up with St. Helena interior designer and home furnishings maven Erin Martin with whom he learned to scour brocantes and auction houses in the south of France and other places in Europe, seeking unusual objects.

Polenske then purchased an historic 1904 farmhouse in Yountville's commercial district to give his collection of furniture and art a home. He converted the building into a two-story wine-tasting venue surrounded by a sun-dappled garden and called the 10,000 square-foot art, wine and design collective Ma(i)sonry Napa Valley, playing on the word masonry and the French word for home. When it opened in late 2008, it was an instant success, adding to Yountville's cachet as a culinary Mecca and the home of Thomas Keller's famed French Laundry restaurant.

Ma(i)sonry's stone interior, filled with eclectic industrial objects, art and Polenske's new line of furniture, is modeled after the celebrated Belgian antiques dealer and designer Axel

Vervoordt's 50-room castle/gallery near Antwerp where visitors can see art and furnishings displayed together.

The difference at Ma(i)sonry is that guests can also taste artisanal wine (from nearly 14 wineries represented) in Polenske's home-like gallery setting. If anything catches their fancy like garden chairs by Ron Mann, one-of-a-kind objects by the Queen's nephew, Viscount David Linley or limited edition Lucite credenzas by Alexandra Von Furstenberg, they can buy them instantly.

In January when the late Ira Wolk's eponymous gallery in St Helena came up for sale unexpectedly, Polenske acquired it to expand Ma(i)sonry's reach. The gallery's prominent location on Main Street makes it critical to Polenske's growing plan; best of all, I. Wolk gallery had the privilege of exhibiting larger sculptural works in the terraced gardens of Auberge du Soleil in Rutherford and MacArthur Place in Sonoma.

"It's a cliché to say that I left the heady world of Wall Street for Main Street in a small town. Others have done that in various ways," Polenske says. "What's new is our tasting room concept and the combination of experiences that make life luxurious."



Arts of Leisure

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