

Ask Michael Polenske, 45, why he decided to give up an extraordinarily successful career in finance to start Blackbird Vineyards, his Napa Valley winery, and he'll say wryly, "Why take a vow of poverty, you mean?"

Ask him again—because it takes some work to get past that wry manner—and you get a little closer to the truth: "It was driven by personal choice. You can't really connect deeply with people through the financial stuff."

Blackbird produces a succulent and complex, Merlot-based wine from a 10-acre vineyard south of Yountville, California, in Napa Valley's cool Oak Knoll district. After only two vintages, the wine has garnered substantial acclaim, along with a waiting list of eager buyers. Polenske, for years a San Francisco resident, now spends much of his

time in Napa Valley. "Literally, you walk out of my house's master bedroom and you're in the vines in 20 steps," he says. "I carve out time every day to spend in the vineyard; if I've got a stack of reading to do, I'll take it to a table out there."

Polenske's former career included stints as a high-level executive at JPMorgan and, more recently,

"There are only about half a dozen superpremium Merlots in California. So I thought, *There's* an opportunity."

as a managing director of the private investment firm Quellos. He juggled his careers in finance and wine for a few years after purchasing the Blackbird property in 2003, but he realized the wine world was much more compelling: "I'd go to a party, and

people who had tens of millions of dollars invested with me would be asking all about the wine, not what I was doing with their money."

Polenske reflects for a moment.

"It's funny that I'm actually putting in more hours at work now than I have in years. But qualitatively, it's definitely time well spent." —*Ray Isle*

Blackbird Vineyards; 707-252-4444 or blackbirdvineyards.com.

michael polenske

MERLOT MASTER



wines michael can't forget

1978 Jordan Cabernet "This was one of the best California wines of that vintage, and for me, it was kind of a Holy Grail. I bought it for my college roommates as a graduation gift."

1980 Trefethen Vineyards Cabernet "I became familiar with Trefethen Vineyards through working at restaurants in college, and I like the idea that it's a family-owned winery. It's a weird coincidence that the property I ended up buying was formerly a part of Trefethen."

1990 Château Pétrus "It would be more than a bit arrogant for me to compare Blackbird to Pétrus"—the world's most sought-after Merlot, and one of the world's most sought-after wines, period—"but we are inspired by it. What we're doing is our equivalent of Pétrus."

PHOTOGRAPHS: KARINA MARIE DIAZ (POLENESKE); JENNIFER MAY (SCHWARTZ, GOAT)