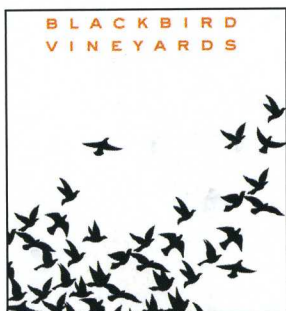


# SING A SONG OF BLACKBIRD, ANTIQUES, AND FINE FOOD

## MICHAEL POLENSKE AND HIS “BUSINESS OF LEISURE”

— By Jenny Peters



Funnily enough, it all started at Chico State, the place investment advisor and entrepreneur Michael Polenske calls “the very prestigious university in Northern California that was rated the Number One party school in ‘Playboy’ magazine two out of the three years that I was there.” He must have learned something in those formative years, however, for Polenske has certainly figured out how to both make money and keep that party spirit alive in the process.

The San Francisco-based financier who specializes in “hedge funds and private equity” for a “boutique financial services private banking” company has made his fortune by helping others to build theirs. But nowadays, while he still keeps his day job, Polenske is well on the way to creating a new sort of empire, his so-called “business of leisure,” designed to give discerning clients access to all the fun and fine things in life.

He started with antiques, “first importing pieces, then opening a home furnishing store in San Francisco called Patina Atelier,” for a while back in the late Nineties, and now supplies his antiques to high-end shops like Martin in St. Helena and Blackman-Cruz in Los Angeles. With that side business humming, Polenske then expanded into private clubs (he’s a founding investor in New York’s Soho House) and restaurants, including Napa’s popular Taylor’s Refresher and two of SF’s best, Terzo and Boulettes Larder (in the Ferry Building), what he calls “a boutique operation about enhanced groceries and take out,” run by renowned slow-food chefs Amaryll Schwertner and Lori Regis.

Most recently, the handsome fortysomething businessman has taken the leap into winemaking, with his Napa-based, Oak Knoll District Blackbird Vineyards.

“Blackbird is the biggest thing I am focused on right now,”

he grins happily. “We have made an ‘03 Merlot, an ‘04 Merlot, and for ‘05 we’ll have two wines, a merlot and a merlot cabernet. We’ll bottle the ‘04 in soon and that will release in the fall, September or October.” Originally sold mostly via a private list ([www.blackbirdvineyards.com](http://www.blackbirdvineyards.com)), the upcoming releases crafted by winemaker Sarah Gott will also be sold in fine restaurants and what he calls “high-end retail shops.”

The delicious 2003 vintage released to rave reviews and quickly sold out, much to Polenske’s delight, for having a successful vineyard is part of his long-term plan to rule that world of high-end leisure that so many people are eager to incorporate into their everyday lives.

“Right now all of those things – Blackbird, the restaurants, and the antiques import business – operate independently. The thought is to bring those things less symbiotic and more synergistic. So you move from having a portfolio that works well together, compliments each other, to one that really brings them together in a concrete environment,” he explains.

“So the next step is to bring the antiques and the wine together and then ultimately bring the food into that as well. We are looking at space in Napa

where I can be pouring the wine, but also have everything on the floor for sale. Putting all the antiques there, where it’s comfortable, you walk in and you feel like you are in a great parlor to taste our wine, but everything is for sale. We think it will be an interesting way to differentiate our wine and also give people an interesting experience.”

So stay tuned, as there’s little doubt that Michael Polenske will make that next step happen somewhere in Napa very soon. Just remember to bring your wallet, as the Blackbird Merlot goes for \$80 a bottle, and the antiques for well more than that. After all, his is the *business* of leisure, don’t forget. ❖

