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# Blackbird Vineyards

The Beatles famously wrote about blackbirds singing in the dead of night, waiting for their moment to arise. Did you know there is a Napa Valley winery, tucked in the middle of our tranquil wine country, and amid an array of our fine feathered friends, inspired by this famous song?

**Michael Polenske**, who grew up listening to the Beatles, was so taken by the imagery created by the lyrics that he decided to create Blackbird Vineyards, from what used to be a walnut orchard.

A wine aficionado for years, Michael, founder and creative director of the Bespoke Collection—which includes Ma(i)sonry Winery and Art Galleries in the Napa Valley, including I. Wolk Gallery in St. Helena, and Recuerdo Wines in Mendoza, Argentina—wanted to add a “world-class winery” to the Bespoke portfolio.

His idea was to build an estate that focused on merlot—which is French for “young blackbird”—after noticing that, of the 125 or so vineyards for sale in the Napa Valley wine country, only five or six are merlot vineyards.

In 2003, Michael’s “moment arose” when he purchased the 10 acres that would become Blackbird, located in the Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley, and created the label. The vineyard, known for its iron-rich soils and cool temperatures, ideal for harvesting merlot grapes, had been originally planted in 1997 (although grapes were harvested and sold only to other vineyards for making wine). The new winery was to be “a nod to merlot and the right-bank wines,” the red wines commonly found in the Bordeaux region of southwestern France.

The Blackbird brand now includes five principal wines, which are limited in production. The most recognized in the collection is Arise—a merlot, cabernet sauvignon, and cabernet franc blend—with hints of black cherries, black olives, vanilla, and truffles.

Each label portrays blackbirds flying in different numbers and formations. The Arise bottle features ten blackbirds sitting on a telephone wire, positioned in the same pattern as the first nine notes of the Beatles song—plus, one extra bird that is flying away, rising up into the sky.

Michael says, “The word, arise, is the most important word in the [Beatles] song. Therefore, Arise is the aspirational wine in our portfolio, aiming for bigger things. It’s the \$50 wine that wants to be the \$100 wine.”

Michael’s team includes the seasoned winemaker, **Aaron Pott**, who worked in France for nearly six years before returning to the United States.

As the label continues to gain popularity, Michael increases production each year, and he is now taking the brand global, with vendors in Asia, Canada, and Europe. And the same painstaking grape selection and sustainable farming practices that helped make the vineyard a success in the first place are still in use today.

“We want to keep the quality as high as possible,” Michael says. ■

A passionate yoga junkie, **Kellie Ell** is a former intern at the *Nob Hill Gazette*. When not writing, she can be found climbing the hills of San Francisco on her bike.



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