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ForbesLife

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NAPA VALLEY INSIDER
A TOUR BEHIND THE VINES

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THE ABSOLUTE BEST

- ARMAGNAC
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TOUR

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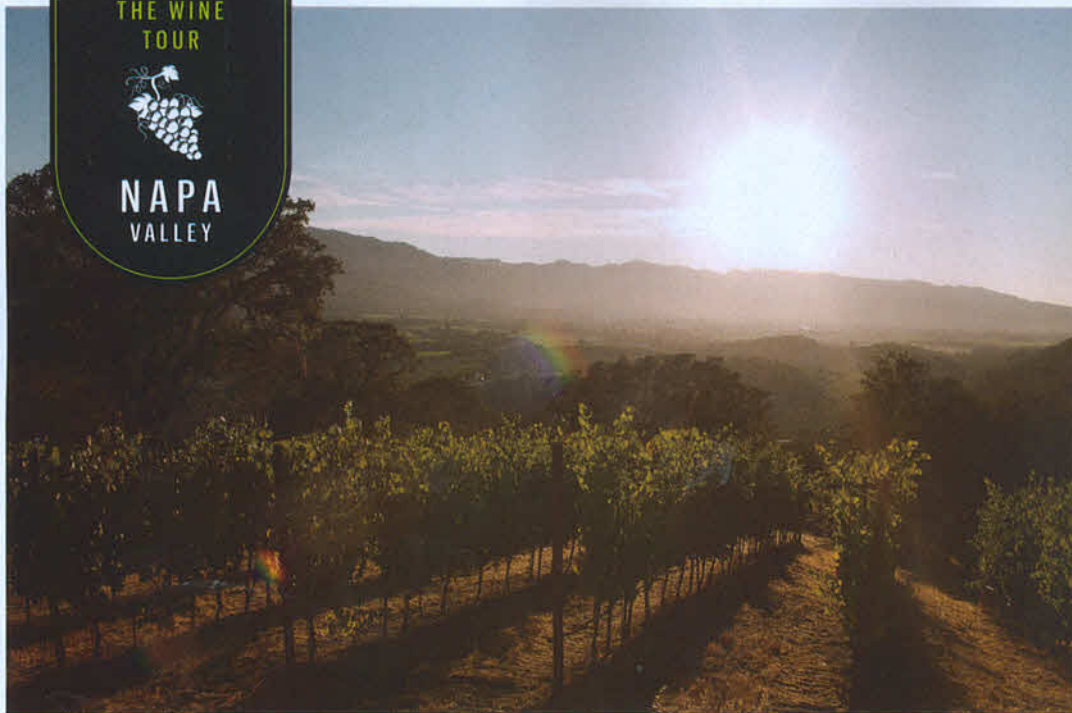
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THE WINE
TOUR



NAPA
VALLEY



Napa Valley

THE ENTREPRENEUR'S TOUR

Wealth manager turned winemaker **Michael Polenske** takes us inside Napa, where the worlds of finance, art, and hedonism mingle among the vines.



By RICHARD NALLEY

Photographs by Jonathan Sprague / Redux

FOR THE BENEFIT of the California DMV, Michael Polenske translates the vanity plate on his black G-class Mercedes, FNG MRLO, as “flocking Merlot”—his winery being named Blackbird Vineyards and all. But anybody in the Merlot-making business, as he is, recognizes the scabrous quote from the movie *Sideways* that sent sales of that wine into free fall. Now in his second career, as a serial entrepreneur in Napa Valley—post-high-management positions in private

banking at Chase, JPMorgan, and American Express—Polenske is devoting himself to what his online bio calls “a life aesthetic.” He is also, pretty clearly, having a lot of fun.

Wine producer, gallery owner, impresario, man-about-Napa, Polenske has offered to squire me around on an insider’s tour of valley places and people. He drives over to fetch me at Meadowood Resort, one of those leafy, semisecret pockets of privilege that Napa





MICHAEL POLENSKE'S NAPA Vine rows in the sunshine (far left); Polenske and his eclectic gallery-cum-tasting-destination, Ma(i)sonry (left, bottom, and far right below); Chanticleer holds forth in Ma(i)sonry's tasting garden (above); Blackbird Vineyards' ball-and-jacks sculpture (below); and flocking bird label (below left).





SERENE OASIS Lori and Howard Backen, and sample fare (below) at their new restaurant, French Blue, in St. Helena.



WHAT'S THE BEST TIME OF YEAR IN NAPA VALLEY?

Late October/November, when the days become a bit crisp after the first rainfall, I think my favorite word is *petrichor*, the gorgeous smell of wet stone and all the plant oils that fill the air after the first rain.

Robert Ceballos, museum director, the Hess Collection, and native Napan

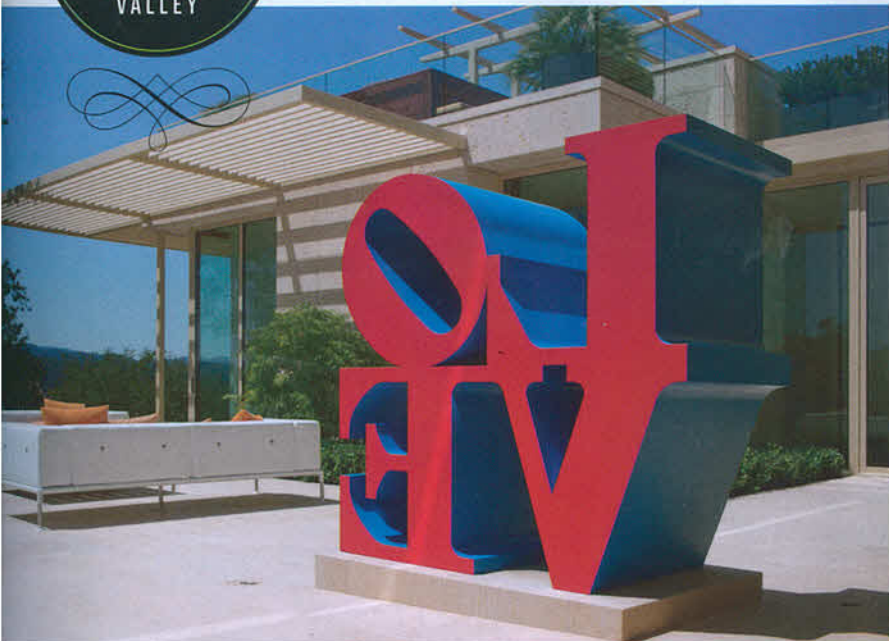
Valley specializes in. It is a cloudless July morning with a perfect kiss of breeze—another Napa specialty. Fit at age 50, graying at the temples, with some Baldwin brother about him, Polenske sports local business attire: blue jeans and a pastel windowpane-checked shirt. As we head down the driveway, I ask him about his founding role in the valley's just-concluded cultural extravaganza, Festival del Sole—I'd encountered the ranks upon ranks of cars returning down Highway 29 as I came in the evening before.

The explanation involves a trip to Russia aboard Gordon Getty's private 737, Polenske's subsequent drafting as a board member of the Russian National Orchestra, and his making a few introductions that opened a few checkbooks. He is not a notably braggadocious man, but as long as I'm asking questions, these turn out to be core ingredients of many Polenske anecdotes: involvement in yet another board position/transaction/acquisition, an unstated suggestion of applied competence, and a cherry on top of just-the-facts ultraconnectedness. Then we pull up to the restaurant French Blue and meet Howard Backen.

Backen is one of the small handful of men who, during the past four decades, conjured today's cosmopolitan fantasy of "Napa Val-

ley" from a sleepy backwater expanse of prune and walnut orchards. If Robert Mondavi inspired the daydream of owning a winery, the architect Howard Backen was the man who crowned the dream and gave it material form. From Meadowood's New England cottages a generation ago to a slew of showplace wineries to Canadian construction heir Cliff Lede's recently completed high-modernist aerie off the Silverado Trail, Backen's visions have shaped Napa's architectural landscape to an exaggerated degree, an assessment that embraces the uncounted Backen knockoffs sprinkled about the valley.

With the new French Blue, Backen and his wife Lori's first foray into restaurant ownership, he transformed a California Craftsman bungalow on St. Helena's Main Street into an airy, serene oasis with a bistromeets-barn interior, all done up in crisp whites and blues with lots of wicker, bead board, exposed brick, and natural wood. (It would be accurate to say that the rustic-chic look is classic Backen, but that might raise a sensitive point. At one point, we are flipping through the gallery pages of Rizzoli's upcoming coffee-table tome about his work, and Backen says to Polenske, "See? I'm not just 'the guy who does fancy barns.' I build a 'barn' when a client asks me for one!")



CLIFF LEDE'S NEW HOWARD BACKEN-DESIGNED modernist hilltop aerie, One Sweet Dream, with Robert Indiana's *Love* in the foreground (above); the pool at Stonescape, with its James Turrell installation: You swim under and inside to observe the play of light on the walls.



Settled in on French Blue's small, brick-enclosed sidewalk patio, I order the fennel-cured salmon breakfast sandwich. Polenske and Backen both put in for some version of a nuts-and-berries health option. These are two Northern California guys, after all. You figure French Blue is counting on tourists to order the cheese omelets.

The two men fall into what is obviously an ongoing dialogue about mutual friends and acquaintances that eventually turns to encounters with Steve Jobs. Polenske recalls a conversation with the Apple founder, a personal idol, that ensued after a party, when the parking valets brought around two identical Porsches, one his, one Jobs'.

But Backen supplies the topper: "Remember that scene in the [Walter Isaacson] Jobs book when Steve and John Lasseter and Jeffrey Katzenberg were having their big fight over Pixar? Well... that was a little awkward for me at the time. I was building houses for all three men."

OUR NEXT STOP is Schramsberg Vineyards, one of Napa's most hauntingly otherworldly wineries. You wind your way up into the Mayacamas

foothills, through dark forests turning to redwood at elevation, and emerge at the sunny crown of a rise with Schramsberg's 19th-century stone and gingerbread Victorian buildings set amid garden plots against a backdrop of soaring timber. Polenske has included Schramsberg on his tour for its beauty, partly, but also for a more practical reason, given the densely interconnected society of Napa Valley: "Schramsberg makes sparkling wine, not Cabernet, so bringing someone here is neutral ground."

The genial public relations manager appears with three bottles of fine postbreakfast sparkling wine. With a first cork popped and a slug from our glasses to fortify our spirits, he leads us into the winery's crepuscular, spectacularly lichen-festooned caves. In the old sections, he points out gouge marks from the picks of the moonlighting Chinese railroad workers who dug the caves in the 1880s. There are about a mile of under-



IS THERE AN AFTER-HOURS PLACE YOU LIKE IN NAPA VALLEY, WHERE ALL THE CHEFS MEET UP?

There's not much after hours, and my staff is made up of boring poets. I do have legislated visits to Ana's Cantina in St. Helena.

Christopher Kostow, three-star Michelin chef, The Restaurant at Meadowood

ground passageways at Schramsberg, allowing plenty of wandering room for our wine tasting on the hoof. Near the end, as our guide pauses to describe the difficulties of preventing stored bottles from exploding, Polenske says behind his hand, "Those bottles sound like me most days: 'full of wine and under a lot of pressure.'"

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, we are lazing about, unpacking fried chicken at a trestle table in the backyard of Polenske's Yountville gallery-tasting room, Ma(i)sonry. Gently waving olive tree branches daple the sunlight. Our box lunches—a staple of Ma(i)sonry's Flights and Bites program—were prepared at Ad Hoc, mega-chef Thomas Keller's takeout venue a few blocks south. Polenske explains the relationship in practical terms: "They've been very flexible in working with us." But frankly, you can tell he just digs Keller's chicken.

We had already marinated in Keller-osity before lunch, wandering the Michelin three-star French Laundry's kitchen garden with Keller's farmer, Tucker Taylor, an intense man with a suggestion of the Druidical. Taylor walked us

THE WINE
TOUR



NAPA
VALLEY



THE MAGAZINE-SPREAD-READY pool area at Auberge du Soleil (left); Neo-Xian warriors at I. Wolk Gallery.

through the 3 acres of meticulously kempt, pine-mulched beds, pulling and handing over tastes of *oca*, a tuber he turned up in Peru; of tiny, explosively flavorful white fraises des bois; and of a pale green leaf from the Scottish moorland that tastes for all the world like a briny Belon oyster. It was yet another reminder that Napa's apex lifestyle Eden, like the Biblical original, rests firmly on roots bedded in the dirt.

Over lunch and a bottle of Blackbird Vineyards' all-too-easy-drinking Arriviste rosé, Polenske narrates his climb as a proud arriviste himself. An Air Force kid, with a finance degree from Chico State, he felt that he had "neither the background nor the pedigree" to be interviewing at JPMorgan's private banking division in San Francisco. But he had toiled his way up through the ranks at IDS and American Express as a rainmaker with fresh ideas, and JPMorgan, it turned out, was looking for a bit of both.

In short order, he leapfrogged the bank's more entrenched executives to head up JPMorgan's 15-state Private Bank West Coast North. (He was later president and CEO of Chase Manhattan Bank & Trust, heading up private banking in the West.) His rise may have been accelerated, but there was nothing easy about it. At one point as a still junior member, he found himself on a stomach-clinching "all-hands" conference call with JPMorgan's private bankers around the world, explaining how he was using innovative technology to aid and track his sales. He heard a mute button switch off and a



voice he recognized as that of a senior executive in New York came on the line.

"Excuse me, Michael? It sounds like you are describing cold calls."

"They're not really cold calls, they're—"

"Michael! They are cold calls. This is JPMorgan. We don't make cold calls."

He was dying on the phone when he heard another mute button switch off and the voice of an even more senior executive came on the line. "Well," said the voice, "we do now."

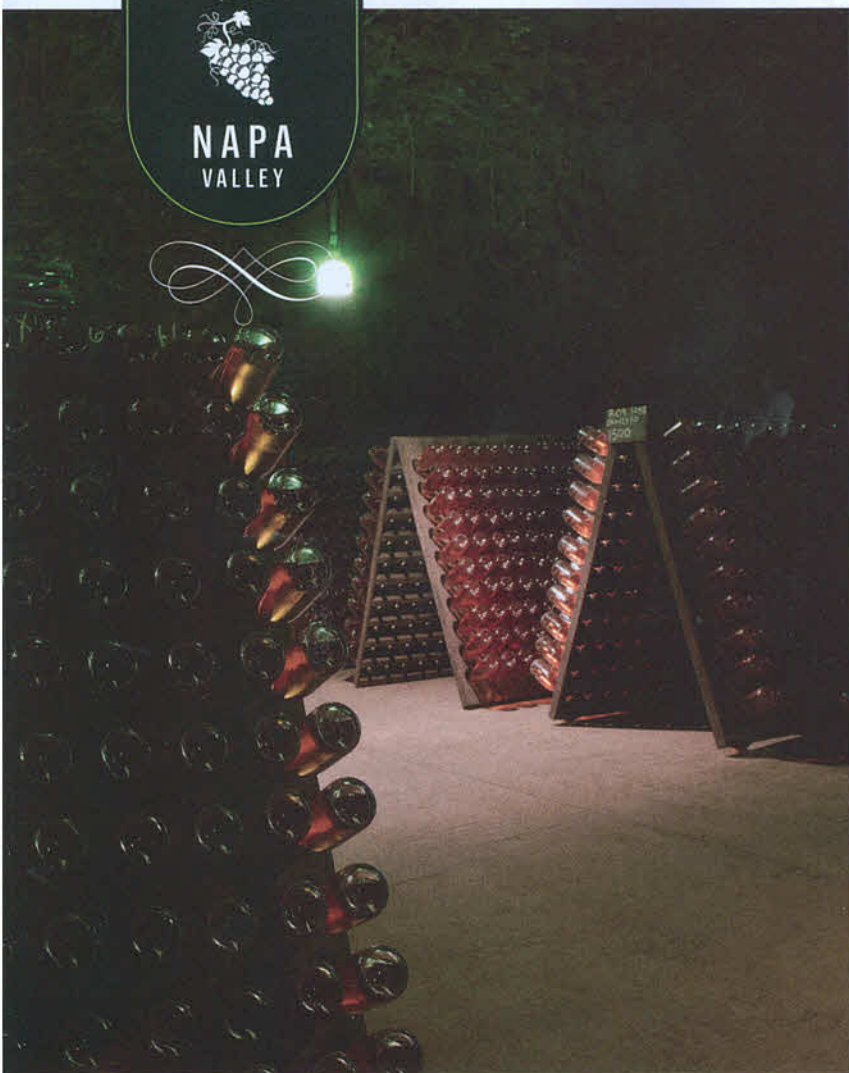
BUT ALL THE WHILE he was in finance down in the city, Polenske was casting an entrepreneurial eye on Napa Valley. "When I looked at Napa, I saw an amazing demographic in my own backyard," he says. "But for all that was going on here, there were only a few types of businesses: wineries, restaurants, and hotels. I thought I could fit into the seams and do something different."

Still, Polenske's first move was predictable enough for a lifelong wine lover like himself. In 2003, he bought a 10-acre Merlot vineyard in the southerly Oak Knoll appellation above the city of Napa. (It's the grape patch with the giant, rusty ball-and-jacks sculpture on the corner.) He recruited a name winemaker and vineyard manager, signed contracts with several high-profile growers for additional grapes, and

WHERE WOULD VISITORS TO NAPA VALLEY BE LIKELY TO RUB ELBOWS WITH THE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF WINEMAKERS?

The bar at Rutherford Grill. You're likely to find our winemaker, Elias Fernandez, there a couple of days a week, as well as a lot of other familiar faces. Chris Carpenter, winemaker for Lokoya, Cardinale, and Mt. Brave, even tends bar on Friday nights.

Doug Shafer, owner, Shafer Vineyards



SPARKLING SERENITY AT SCHRAMSBERG VINEYARDS Traditional riddling racks—Schramsberg is one of the few sparkling-wine makers in America to still use the hands-on technique (left); Hugh Davies, who runs Schramsberg for his family, works the vines; an allée of oaks.

began positioning Blackbird as a “Bordeaux Right Bank-style” (i.e., Merlot- and Cabernet Franc-based) alternative to Napa’s Cabernet Sauvignon-centric run-of-the-mill. Blackbird’s top wines, priced at \$125, now regularly turn in scores of 90-plus in Robert Parker’s *The Wine Advocate* and in *The Wine Spectator*.

Polenske’s next venture was taken from no playbook but his own. In 2008, by now out of the financial world (by a stroke of good fortune) and all-in for Napa Valley, he refurbished an ivy-covered turn-of-the-20th-century quarry-stone farmhouse and conjured up Ma(i)sonry. (The name, with its play on the French word for *house*, “just came to me,” he explains. “I’m a student of branding, and once you see that you don’t forget it.”) The place is, in essence, four businesses in one. Or, viewed alternatively, a capsule tour of Michael Polenske’s obsessions.

As an art gallery, Ma(i)sonry shares some of the artists and limited edition pieces with Polenske’s 2009 acquisition, I. Wolk Gallery, a sunny, prominent storefront space in St. Helena we’d visited earlier in the day. As an interior design destination, Ma(i)sonry’s offerings are eclectic in the extreme, with a vein of leathery-industrial steampunk—think welded bookcases, antique French gym equipment, surgical spotlights.

This is also an event space and, perhaps most important, a wine-tasting destination with offerings from an insider’s roster of about 20 Polenske pals and associates (and including Blackbird, of course;



plus, Ma(i)sonry’s own label and Polenske’s new Argentine brand, Re-cuerdo). Make a reservation and the Ma(i)sonry team will set you up under the olive trees out back with wines made by artisan-luminaries like Thomas Rivers Brown, perhaps, or Heidi Barrett or Tor Kenward. “Our team has gotten good at engaging clients in a dialogue,” he says. “Some are just here to have fun, but if they are here to buy and learn, we’ll take them on a journey.”

OUR OWN ODYSSEY pauses later that afternoon for a sunset drink on the panoramic terrace at Auberge du Soleil, the sleek Mediterranean-inspired resort perched on a hillside above Rutherford. I describe



some of Napa's lesser-known wonders—revealed that day by Polenske—to our cocktail companion, George Goeggel, Auberge's managing partner. There was, for instance, StoneScape, an astonishing "art cave" so exclusive that I was allowed to visit only after promising that I would not print any description of its whereabouts, and the jewel-box Cameo movie theater. ("You look down the row on a Friday: Bill Harlan is here, the Swansons

are there; it's where we all go for date night.")

I tell Goeggel we've just come from the downtown Napa studio of Richard von Saal, a charismatic, sophisticated young artist-interior designer with a seething volcano of ideas (and a growing list of impressive clients). As we are leaving Auberge, Polenske points to a whimsical sculpture of four sheep doing a cancan outside the hotel's new reception area. All of the 80 artworks that prominently dot the landscaping at Auberge are from I. Wolk Gallery, but those sheep are the killer client magnet. "That one sculpture," he says, pausing a moment in appreciation, "has paid for the gallery twice over."

THE SPRAWLING Italian restaurant Bottega in Yountville is right in Michael Polenske's wheelhouse. The celebrity chef owner, Michael Chiarello, is a pal and everyone who works here is either Mr. Polenske-ing him or joshing with him. As we are ushered back to the glass-enclosed private dining room in back, the first of his vintner dinner



WHAT ARE THE COOLEST NAPA EXPERIENCES MOST PEOPLE WILL MISS IF YOU DON'T SUGGEST THEM?

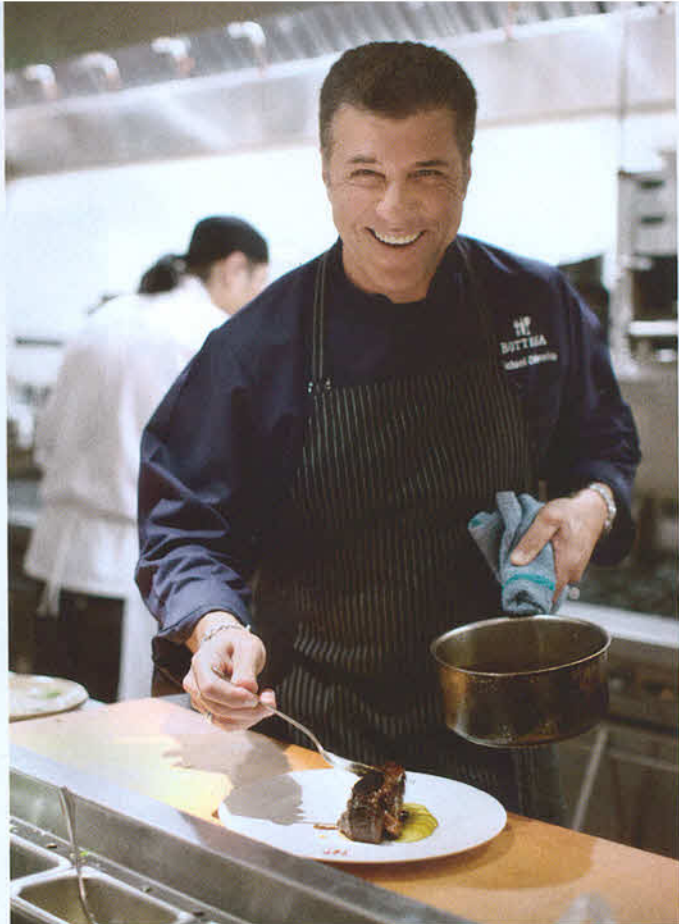
Foraging for mushrooms with Connie Green; hiking during wildflower season at Lake Hennessy; the Farm Tour at Long Meadow Ranch with a private lunch from their restaurant, Farmstead; the duck burger at Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen.

Chris Parkes, concierge, Poetry Inn

guests arrives. Carmen Policy, the wry, sharp-witted former NFL executive and current proprietor of the top-notch Casa Piena winery, spots Polenske and affects mock surprise. "Our very own George Clooney!"

"Now it begins," Polenske says, rolling his eyes.

Next up are Oscar Renteria of Renteria wines, who also runs one of the valley's largest vineyard-management companies; John Truchard of John Anthony; Juan Mercado of Realm; and Jeff Smith of Hourglass. Tasha Hamilton, Bottega's manager and our mistress of ceremonies for the evening, informs us that it is National Tequila Day—surprisingly, this is actually true—and we start in with the headlamp-size glasses of margaritas.



THE HANGOUT Bottega (and Food Network) chef Michael Chiarello. Below: The French Laundry's kitchen gardener, Tucker Taylor.





The conversation seems to start in midflow, everybody catching up on one another's crops and families—vintner gossip. The men are all regulars at Bottega, and all want a smile or a ribbing from pretty Tasha the way guys in a group will, nobody meaning anything by it really but putting a little competitive importance into it, too, on some level. As the food starts arriving—a plank lifted over my head and set down with mason jars

of polenta and octopus—it's clear that Polenske has scored the Tasha coup of the night: Course seven on our private dining menu is Gnocchi della Cora, "Michael's favorite, named in honor of his mother," she explains.

Polenske suggests that everyone take a turn pouring his own wine and telling his story, and the evening evolves into a kind of a vinous *Canterbury Tales*, the accounts leavened here and there with humor but all of them, to a man, ultimately moving. Oscar Renteria relates the history of his parents, Mexican migrant farmworkers who vowed to have only two children so they could marshal the resources to give them a different life. The Renterias removed him and his sister from the churning milieu of 41 cousins up valley and scraped to put them through

private school in the town of Napa—"I was the only kid in second grade who didn't speak a word of English"—and ultimately, through college (Oscar to St. Mary's, his sister to Stanford). Napa Valley may be only 30 miles long, but it is apparently big enough to accommodate a lot of dreams.

It is only as the evening is breaking up that I realize that one elite vintner at the table hasn't taken a turn or poured his wine, and it's the guy who's picking up the tab. Polenske has quietly pushed his friends forward and stepped into the background. I ask if we can open his bottle, and everybody pauses for a glass. Even after a night of sensational wines, the Blackbird is an enlivening drink, taut and cascadingly flavorful, and one Michael Polenske might have named for himself, a blend dubbed The Contrarian. **FL**



IF YOU COULD OWN ONE WINERY IN NAPA VALLEY, MONEY NO OBJECT, WHICH ONE WOULD IT BE?

Diamond Creek, because of its unique vineyard sites on Diamond Mountain and its long history of producing great vintages.

William Sherer, master sommelier and wine director, Redd



VOLCANICALLY TALENTED Napa designer Richard Von Saal in his warehouse studio