



BLACKBIRD
VINEYARDS

Among Napa's New Names, Blackbird Vineyards Is Must-Have Merlot
By Elin McCoy

May 24 (Bloomberg) -- Scouting out the next hot boutique wine while it's still under the radar is an insider's sport in California's Napa Valley.

I play the game on every visit, alerted to promising newcomers during gossipy conversations over dinner and at local wine shops. I once picked up a tip while standing in line for a latte to go at the Oakville Grocery.

All too often the touted new name turns out to be yet another over-the-top, \$100-plus, high-alcohol, big-ego cabernet made in tiny quantities and only available through a mailing list that's already full.

So discovering Blackbird Vineyards during a recent stay was a pleasant surprise. In this land of 150-plus cabernets, the winery's deliciously plush, balanced and elegant 2004 red is 95 percent merlot (\$80; 1,100 cases). It almost convinced me that this grape, dissed in the movie "Sideways," could make a major comeback. And this is only the winery's second vintage.

I sniffed out Blackbird and half a dozen other interesting new labels at this year's Premiere Napa Valley, a barrel tasting and auction for the trade staged annually at the Culinary Institute of America. It's where buzz often starts.

Blackbird owner Michael Polenske, a former banker and investment manager, was one of 192 valley vintners telling their stories while pouring one-of-a-kind offerings from the stellar, soon-to-be-bottled 2005 vintage. Even though these samples were made especially for the auction, tasting them is a way to gauge a new winery's quality and style, get a preview of a new blend and decide which names are worth following.

Blackbird's supple, complex blend of merlot and cabernet franc, for example, was a variation of a brand-new wine that it plans to release in October -- the 2005 Paramour (\$70; 200 cases). If Blackbird's merlot is Pomerol-inspired, this is the winery's St. Emilion, and it wowed me.

There are about 400 bricks-and-mortar wineries in the Napa Valley. No one knows how many 100-case "experimental projects" are being made with purchased grapes in a corner of someone else's winery, but many were pouring at Premiere. Stefan Blicher, co-owner of local online wine merchant Blicher-Pierce, estimates that he's seen more than 60 new brands in the past year.

My secret to sleuthing out the best up-and-comers is to follow the elite winemakers. When a name-brand talent joins a new winery, the wines probably will be worth paying attention to. Sarah Gott, Blackbird's winemaker, won acclaim during previous stints at Joseph Phelps and Quintessa.

Diamond Terrace, whose cabernet sauvignon also impressed me, recently enlisted winemaking guru Thomas Brown for its brooding, intense Diamond Mountain cab (2003, \$55) and new Eagle Summit Howell

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Mountain cuvee, which makes its debut with the '05 vintage. Brown lends his stardust to almost a dozen new boutiques, including Maybach, Schrader, Tamber Bey and Outpost.

Heidi Peterson Barrett is behind the powerful, succulent and chocolatey Revana Family Vineyard cab (2004, \$105), while Celia Masyczek made D.R. Stephens's big, concentrated Moose Valley Vineyard cab (2004, \$100), and famed Philippe Melka delivers solid pleasure with Parallel (2004, \$45).

To me, another clue is the name of the vineyard where the grapes were grown. Does it have a track record of making great wines? Polenske, 45, lucked out. He wasn't really looking to get into the wine business in 2003, when he bought a small weekend house with a 10-acre merlot vineyard named Blackbird in southern Napa's Oak Knoll district.

Due diligence revealed that Blackbird, planted in 1997, already had been made famous by superstar winemaking consultant Mia Klein. She'd purchased the grapes from the former owner for four years, using them as the principal part of a distinctive merlot she bottled under her own brand, Selene. She put the vineyard name on the label and it quickly developed a reputation.

"After I purchased the property, I'd wake up with Blackbird on my mind," Polenske said. He decided to "take the wine to the next level," using the grapes for an all-Blackbird wine of his own, something he could oversee alongside his day job. He counted on the vineyard's following to help build the brand and chose a winemaker who had fewer consulting commitments than Klein.

Many new wineries don't grow their own grapes. Their best guarantee for a great wine is to buy them from acclaimed vineyards that supply other top wineries. Stewart Cellars' big, fragrant cabs (2003, \$60), for example, rely on fruit from well-known Beckstoffer and Stagecoach vineyards.

Hype beyond the valley's insiders is essential for staying power, and Blackbird already has captured some Hollywood buzz. Its 2004 merlot was the only red poured at this year's Vanity Fair Oscar party, attended by celebrities such as J Lo and Martin Scorsese. The result? "We received four times more online orders in March than we'd had in the three previous months combined," Polenske reported.

Dedicated Napa wine scout Doug Wilder, director of California acquisitions and sales for wine collector services company Vinfolio, was the first to tout Blackbird after the inaugural vintage was released. Vinfolio offers a good selection of the latest new names, and Wilder likes to keep ahead in this game. He started reeling off a list of wines that weren't at Premiere for me to investigate, then stopped.

"I have a box of secrets about new wines I can't talk about -- yet," he said.