



BLACKBIRD
VINEYARDS

From Screaming Eagle to Harlan Estate, Napa Valley is undoubtedly an international standard bearer for Cabernet Sauvignons. With the designation of Napa's fourteenth AVA, Oak Knoll District is well poised to bring forth the prominence and elegance of Napa Valley Merlot—with an inspiration from Pomerol. The Merlot-based wines of Pomerol have historically challenged the first growths of Bordeaux, a forbearer to Oak Knoll's future.

Perched to seize the day as Oak Knoll's foremost Merlot is Blackbird Vineyards, located in the heart of the district. Since 1999, this former walnut orchard, first planted with 5717 vines two years earlier, quietly provided fruit to many of Napa's finest winemakers, for whom it has yielded astonishing reviews and stellar scores. Purchased by entrepreneur Michael Polenske in 2003, Blackbird Vineyards is now an ultra premium label in its own right. Fittingly, 'Merlot' is French patois for 'Little Blackbird.'

An early harbinger of Blackbird's potential arose when Mia Klein, of Dalla Valle fame, created a Blackbird vineyard designate for her highly acclaimed 1999 Selene Merlot (no less than 95% of the fruit in the bottle must be from the named vineyard.) Three of the top critics in the industry- Robert Parker, Steven Tanzer, and *Wine Spectator's* James Laube- scored this wine in the 90s.

The success of this particular crush was clearly no accident. Blackbird's inaugural 2003 bottling, culled from a small crush of grapes that weren't already claimed by other vintners, was awarded a stellar **98 points** by *Vinfolio*, proclaiming it, "the best Merlot nobody had ever heard of." *ACME Fines Wines News* was equally enthusiastic, saying, "it is with wines like this that we never question why we are in this business." Blackbird's 2003 Merlot was also given a score of 95 by *Vintrust*, proclaiming it, "hedonistic in length."

Polenske likens the Oak Knoll District and Blackbird Vineyards, in particular, to France's Pomerol region, known for its stellar Merlots. "The terroir of the Oak Knoll appellation is strikingly similar to Pomerol," says Polenske. "The soil and the climates are similar, and like Oak Knoll, it's more rustic and rural than other regions. With Blackbird, I've found a vineyard that can produce a world-class wine," adds Polenske, "with a Merlot in the style of the 'Garagiste' wines that have grown to prominence in the last 20 years, with a nod to the classics on the right bank."

Blackbird Vineyards lies north of the city of Napa at Oak Knoll and Big Ranch Road. It is one of the coolest regions in the valley—second only to Carneros— and like Pomerol, is home to fine, gravelly and clay loam soils, which create an ideal growing region for Merlot. Blackbird continues to provide fruit to such winemakers as Bob Foley and Romel Rivera. This speaks volumes about Blackbird's terroir and is validation of the fruit quality.

In launching Blackbird as an ultra premium label, Polenske assembled a dynamic team to execute his vision. Among them is winemaker Aaron Pott, who worked for nearly six years making wine in France before returning to the United States to build his illustrious career. Tending to the vineyard is Renteria Vineyard Management, a multi-generation family farming company, now managed by son, Oscar. Oscar believes the infusion of technology is insurance for the future. By combining practical, generational field knowledge with innovative trials and experimentation, the Renteria family has found a balance which allows them to grow the finest grapes possible.

Rounding out the team is Paul Leary. As President, Paul develops forecasting strategies, establishes sales and distribution channels, develops an infrastructure for direct to consumer sales, and oversee the short and long-term objectives of the winery.

As artisans, the Blackbird team's goal is to create beautifully handcrafted wines that embody the best of what the Oak Knoll terroir has to offer. As Polenske puts it, "Our promise is to offer a wine that represents our personal integrity and to maximize the natural advantage we have with a vineyard of truly unique character."