





Michael Polenske photographed at Ma(i)sonry in Yountville

ART *and* WINE

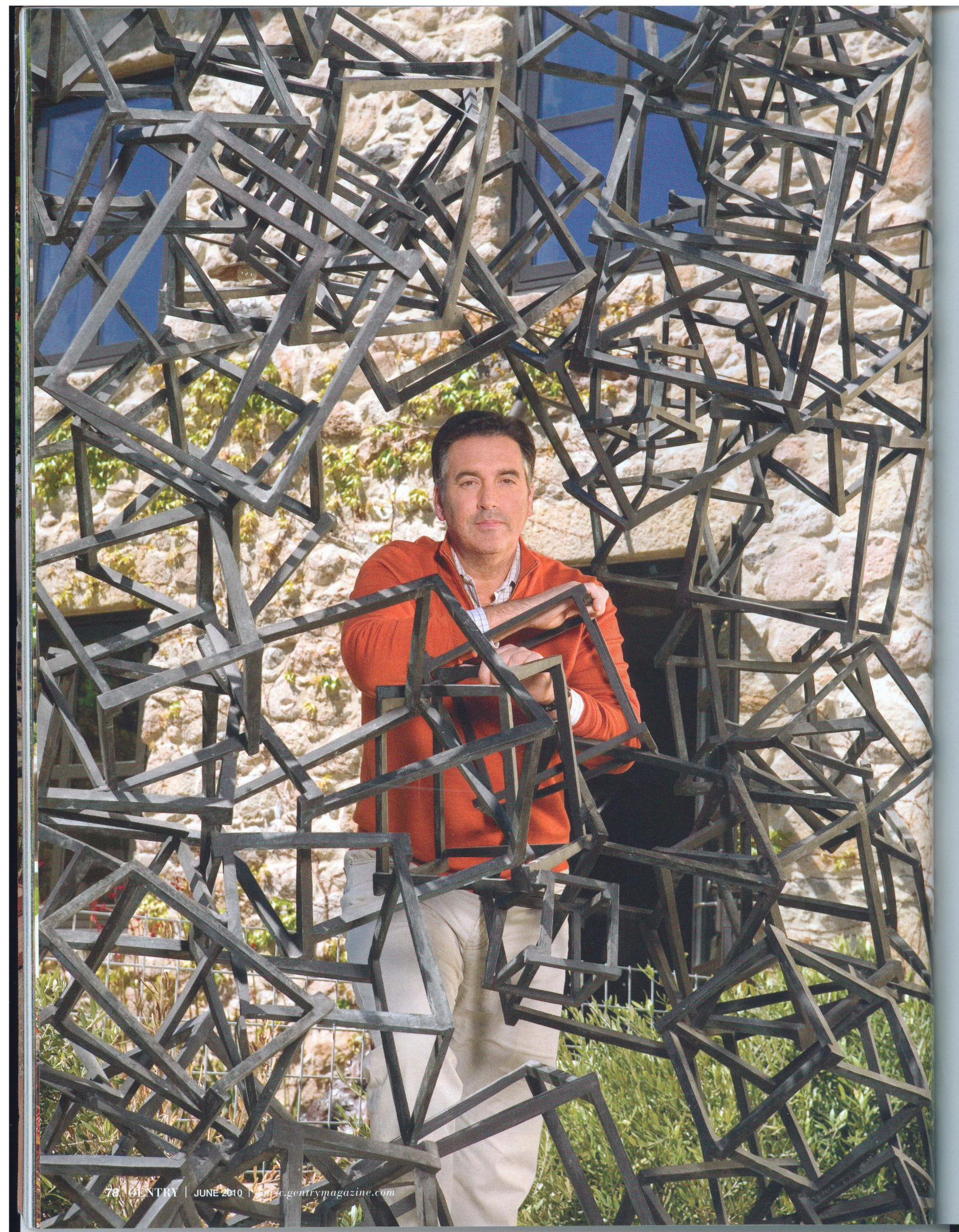
Michael Polenske has honed his skills over the years as a master of public relations, keenly understanding the synergy between good press and good business. His latest ventures in Napa Valley have made him a media darling, but the hype would be short-lived if his products weren't great—and they are. Gentry reports.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK HUTCHESON

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Michael Polenske was born in Bermuda. His pilot father was a bit of an adventurer who chased hurricanes and flew in the Presidential Support Squadron for Richard Nixon's Air Force One and Two. Eventually, he moved the family to Travis Air Force Base. As a child and teen, Polenske glimpsed the good life from afar. His neighborhood of tract houses was mere miles away from the verdant Napa Valley. He knew that something special was happening on the other side of the hills and he wanted very much to be a part of it.

His college years were spent studying finance—a subject he took to with alacrity. He supplemented his heavy course load with classes in viticulture, thinking that he would eventually provide financial services to the winery owners of Napa Valley. Fate had other plans for Polenske. His first job in financial services took him to Menlo Park and the storied 94025 zip code encompassing Sand Hill Road—the center of the venture capital universe. The smart kid from Fairfield was soon running the private financial portfolios of a wide array of high-tech entrepreneurs, VCs, and Silicon Valley corporate giants.



Polenske parlayed his talent for managing investments into a lucrative career with American Express and J.P. Morgan. "I took the path of least resistance," he recalls. "There was so much wealth being created at the time. The right place to be was Silicon Valley." Along the way, he immersed himself in the fabric of San Francisco society, chairing fundraisers and serving on the boards of nonprofit fine arts organizations. Simultaneously, his appreciation of the finer things in life evolved into a passion for intellectual connoisseurship. He found himself wanting to increase his understanding of fine art, antiques, cuisine, and—you guessed it—wine.

Indeed, the siren song of "wine country living" continued to call Polenske. "I knew that was what I ultimately wanted," he says. It was all just a matter of timing, and the right timing arrived in 2003. A portion of the Trefethen property that had been carved out as a separate vineyard nearly two decades before became available. The owners had planted it wisely, but for personal reasons were letting it go. Polenske spotted this diamond in the rough and seized the opportunity to purchase Blackbird Vineyards. "The vineyard was in its fifth leaf—the first year that you'll have a shot at getting good production," he points out. "The former owners had used the right root stock for the land, which is part of the Oak Knoll appellation and boasts the second coolest location in the Napa Valley, very similar to the growing conditions on the right bank of Bordeaux."

By 2005, Blackbird Vineyards released its debut 2003 merlot to astounding reviews. *Wine Enthusiast* raved, "Rich and complex, with the classy mouthfeel that Napa provides so effortlessly. You might mistake it for a valley floor cabernet for the new oak-infused blackberry, cherry, and cocoa flavors and soft, immediate appeal. The tannins are there, but they're melted, sweet, and gentle." *Vinfolio* gave the debut merlot a staggering 98 points. *Vintrust* awarded it 95 points. "People called it the best merlot made in America," notes Polenske with pride. That first release was tiny. It was available only to private clients and was completely sold out within three weeks. Polenske knew he had something special on his hands and has continued to nurture and grow Blackbird Vineyards along with expert consultant winemaker Sarah Gott and award-winning winemaker Aaron Pott.

In 2007, Polenske came up with a plan to marry his love of art and wine in a unique concept gallery in Yountville. He purchased a century-old stone building that had been a bed and breakfast, and by the fall of 2008, re-opened it as Ma(i)sonry—a play on the French word for home and masonry—a nod to the building's construction. Ma(i)sonry is half experiential gallery, half wine tasting room. Guests are encouraged to stop in and sip a glass of

wine while browsing through Ma(i)sonry's beautiful building and gardens replete with fine antiques, paintings, and sculpture. "I actually missed the opening," says Polenske, who was stuck on a flight from Europe. "It was October 1, and the economic collapse began that week." Despite the timing, Polenske says that first year was successful for the fledgling operation. "We didn't hit the numbers we'd hoped for, but all in all, we did pretty well." Ma(i)sonry has been gaining traction ever since.

January of this year saw Polenske's empire grow further after



Michael Polenske, here and opposite, in the sculpture garden, photographed at Ma(i)sonry in Yountville.

he acquired the I. Wolk Gallery in St. Helena and the sculpture garden at Auberge du Soleil. The late Ira Wolk had opened his gallery in the early 90's. His eye for talent and the combination of an increasingly astute local customer base made the I. Wolk Gallery one of the most discerning on the West Coast, with a roster of world-famous artists on constant show. The strength of the I. Wolk Gallery connections will only serve to bolster Polenske's Ma(i)sonry brand as it expands.

When asked what he's most excited about for his businesses in the next few months, Polenske eagerly points to his participation in this month's, Auction Napa Valley. "This is our fourth year of full participation," he notes. "We're working with *The Robb Report* on a Live Auction package. The winner will have the opportunity to drive an automobile from the 'Car of the Year,' issue and will receive a select collection of Blackbird Vineyards wines." But, he notes, he's always thinking about new ventures. He often contemplates the idea of a boutique hotel and a vineyard venue for special events.

Polenske quips that he "took a vow of poverty" to indulge in a Wine Country way of life, but judging from the contagious smile on his face, one quickly realizes that he's exchanged the world of high finance for *la dolce vita*, and he's loving every minute of it. ■