

For Indians around the world who enjoy  
wine and the good life

Volume 10, Issue 5, October-November 2015 ₹200

# Sommelier INDIA

## THE WINE MAGAZINE

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CHÊNEBLEU EXTREME WINE

# IMMERSED IN WINE

Photos courtesy of the winery

SCEA Domaine de la Verrière Chêne Bleu set in the midst of vineyards with the blue branches of an old oak tree, after which the wines are named, visible in the distance



## Carolyn Kauser-Abbott

describes five hectic and thrilling hands-on days at the most comprehensive and luxurious wine course in the world

The Extreme Wine Experience packing list was the first clue that I might be out of my depth. The recommendation was to bring casual clothing, sun hats, rain gear, bathing suits and black-tie attire, for the final evening. Now, I had two issues. I was signed up for a five-day wine immersion course, with what I judged to be sub-par skills. And there was nothing in my closet remotely suitable for a black-tie event. Fortunately, the second issue was easily rectifiable.

La Verrière is a property that includes a 35-hectare (87 acre) working vineyard located 3.5 kilometres (2.2 miles) outside of the hilltop hamlet of Crestet in Provence's Vaucluse. As I drove farther away from the village and onto what appeared to be the intersection of hiking trails I thought that my GPS had failed me, but to turn the car around risked going into a ditch. It was then that I noticed a sign for the Croix de la Verrière – indicating that I was close to my destination. Just around the next bend was my first glimpse of the postcard-worthy panorama of La Verrière, where rows of lush leafy vines bearing fruit destined for the 2015 vintage of Chêne Bleu wines framed the main house.

My first chance to connect with fellow Extreme Wine attendees was during the Welcome Dinner – a so-called “casual” evening which was a taste sensation beginning with an heirloom tomato stuffed with vegetable tartare in burrata cream and ending with fresh strawberries served over a balsamic reduction and crème anglaise. As we worked our way through the beautifully prepared four-course dinner, I reflected upon the fact that a common interest in wine had brought together a diverse group from Peru, parts of North America and India. By dessert, we had sampled the full range of Chêne Bleu wines – from the 2014 rosé and the crisp



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**As the dinner chatter wound down, it became apparent the week ahead would be one of *both*, world-class wines and gourmet cuisine!**

An aerial view of beautiful La Verrière, the property that took 10 years to restore from the remains of a 9th century priory and an abandoned glass factory dating back to 1427

white 2011 Aliot (a white Grenache blend) to the pair of signature reds named after medieval lovers, Abélard and Héloïse (a 2009 Grenache and Syrah blend, respectively). As the dinner chatter wound down, it became apparent the week ahead would be one of *both*, world-class wines and gourmet cuisine!

**A**t 9:00am sharp the next morning the first session began. Clive Barlow, a Master of Wine, and his fellow instructor, Nick Dumergue, with their résumés fully drenched in the wine trade, have taught at the Extreme Wine Experience for eight years running. Although the course material follows the Wine Education and Spirits Trust (WSET) Level 2 syllabus (the same information as is offered in classes around the world) Extreme Wine includes a vast selection of benchmark wines from across the globe. The programme offered at La Verrière is supplemented by Chêne Bleu's tailored course content, with knowledge that CEO Nicole Rolet feels is essential to successfully cracking the wine code.

When Xavier Rolet purchased this plot of land in 1993, it is highly likely that there were some hardy discussions at the local brasserie. Why would anyone, especially an outsider, buy a parcel of land that had been in limbo for 40 years due to an unsettled inheritance dispute? The 135 hectare (340 acre) property consisted of some dishevelled grapevines, a 9th century priory and the remains of a subsequent glass factory dating back to 1427. Xavier had essentially bought a ruin. Nicole told me that her







Top left: The medieval garden at La Verrière. Above: Outdoor seating with a view of the jacuzzi and vineyards. Left: Gourmet delicacies by the winery's Michelin level chef, Fabrice Leclair. Below: Packed lunch with a bottle of Chêne Bleu rosé

introduction to la Verrière occurred in the early days of her relationship with the handsome Frenchman. By that time he had fallen in love with the property and harboured a dream of creating a world-class vineyard. According to Nicole, the thought of living through the renovation realities that Peter Mayle had turned into his best-selling book, *A Year in Provence*, gave her many sleepless nights.

The project took over 10 years and thousands of decisions to complete. All the new buildings are assimilated into the landscape, wherever possible old structures are retained and in every case the history of the medieval site is respected. Xavier's sister Bénédicte and her husband, Jean-Louis Gallucci, relocated to Chêne Bleu to establish and run the wine operations as viticulturist and winemaker, respectively.

The Rolet family has a history of wine production from the Jura in eastern France. It was this innate passion for the vines and a belief in the unique terroir at Chêne Bleu located 550m (1700 feet) above sea level that propelled their enormous effort to venture into the winemaking business here. From the outset, the team at Chêne Bleu surrounded itself with respected wine industry advisors, including Zelma Long and Philippe Cambie, who channelled the evolution into a fully-fledged operation that now produces 5,000 to 6,000 cases per year. The Chêne Bleu wine label







The WSET programme offered at La Verrière is supplemented by Chêne Bleu's tailored course content, knowledge that CEO Nicole Rolet feels is essential to successfully cracking the wine code



Top: Vineyard lesson with winemaker, Jean-Louis Gallucci. Above: The well-appointed classroom at La Verrière. Above, right: CEO Nicole Rolet. Bottom: Line-up of over 120 wines tasted during the five-day course







is a pictorial homage to the medieval past, the mythical grapes and the tireless team who now run the operation and wine production.

Nicole Rolet admits that 15 years ago her understanding of the wine industry was weak. However, with her background in capital market sales and political science Nicole is one who thirsts for knowledge, so she began taking wine-related courses in London and elsewhere, but quickly realised that the standard curricula were lacking in the realities of the vine's lifecycle. Where was the information on how to grow healthy grapes, how terroir affects varietals and how winemaking techniques have an effect on the glass of wine that is eventually consumed?

Nicole worked with Clive Barlow to craft the material for what is the basis of the Chêne Bleu Extreme Wine Experience – a full-immersion wine education programme. During the week, Clive and Nick present WSET course material in class complemented by a working visit to the vineyard where participants prune the vines, collect soil samples and inspect the new crop of grapes. We even got the chance to create our own *assemblage* or blend of Grenache, Syrah and Viognier, an enriching combination of experience that increased my appreciation and understanding of wine in the shortest possible time!

When Clive and Nick informed us that we would taste over 120 wines during the week, I started to get cold sweats. Would I make it through all those wines and still be able to tell one red from another? I discovered that the WSET approach to wine tasting is systematic,



Top left: Extreme Wine instructors, Clive Barlow and Nick Dumergue with a branch of an ancient vine. Top, right: Chêne Bleu's award-winning rosé. Its label is a pictorial depiction of the winery's medieval past with the blue oak in the centre. Above: La Verrière entrance hall





Top: Guests and students seated for dinner overlooking the vineyards — a fine dining experience with gourmet cuisine and the featured wines of the day. Centre: Grapes ready for picking. Above: Refreshing white wines to taste

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logical and easy to follow. I can confirm that my approach to my first sip is now more considered than it was, but I am not confident that I can distinguish between peach and apricot aromas!

Each meal at La Verrière was beautifully presented and perfectly paired with the featured wines from that day. It would be impossible to pick a favourite dish other than to say that if I were rating for Michelin, Chef Fabrice Leclaire and his sous-chef Cyril Vernon would receive a star-studded rating. If that is not enough, at La Verrière you are never quite sure who might show up for dinner; for us it was Eric de St Victor of Château de Pibarnon, a winemaker who came to share his personal wine story.

On the first day when we began sampling wine in the morning, I wondered whether I would make it through the next five days. Then, all of a sudden, it was Thursday night and we were seated wearing gala attire at an elegant dinner table, being serenaded by the voice of an opera singer. My initial doubts had long been washed away with the fantastic wines, and the increased awareness I now possessed. My only regret was that I had not been able to spend enough time enjoying the comfort of the Frette sheets and silk duvet in my suite. ♦