

Nicole Rolet, principal of the very boutique La Verrière wine estate, has no doubt about the most satisfying moment in her relatively new métier. “It was when we came back with two silver and one gold medal from our first competitive blind tasting by professional, impartial judges. It was the validation I’d been hoping for: that our Chêne Bleu wines could stand on their own merit without reading the back label about where and by whom they’d been made.”

Eagle-eyed readers will recognise the name: Nicole is married to the remarkable Xavier Rolet, who began his glittering career with Goldman Sachs before moving to Credit Suisse First Boston and Dresdner Kleinwort Benson, and later becoming CEO of Lehman Brothers in France.

In 2009, Rolet was appointed CEO of the London Stock Exchange, at which point he really stepped into the financial media’s global spotlight. Many interviews revealed that Rolet has quite a hinterland. Some would mention his fund-raising activities for Médecins Sans Frontières and his love of endurance driving in the Paris-Dakar rally. Others would dwell on his affinity for beekeeping and nature conservation. But although almost all mentioned the remote French vineyard that he and his wife have lovingly created, none has explored its utterly perfectionist benchmark approach to producing fine wine.

You’ll find La Verrière in the Vaucluse region of Provence, perched above the tiny hamlet of Crestet amid some magnificent mountain topography. To the east soars Mont Ventoux, to the south are the Dentelles de Montmirail, and north lies the expansive Ouvèze Valley.

Cradled in this vertiginous landscape, the 150-hectare estate is no less impressive. All around is woodland forest, which gives way to the immaculate sloping vineyards that lie in an almost perfect horseshoe shape. Next you notice the more formal olive groves and terraced gardens, on the edge of which is the stark and stunning Chêne Bleu (blue oak tree) that adorns all the estate’s wine labels. Last but by no means least, your eyes rest on the infinity pool and the beautiful priory, parts of which date back to the ninth century.

However, this is just the apéritif. Closer inspection reveals a helicopter pad, a seminar and wine-tasting room, kitchen gardens, tennis court, children’s play area, state-of-the-art winery and 11 sumptuous bedrooms. Self-evidently, this place is the complete package. Nothing has been left to chance. No detail has been overlooked and certainly no expense has been spared. The contrast between its current state and its previous incarnation couldn’t be more acute. In 1994, when Rolet first set eyes on the place, it was a wreck, having been abandoned for decades. The buildings were covered in foliage, the roofs had collapsed and there was even a fig tree growing in one of the rooms. The vineyard was no better, having been completely neglected.

Yet where every other prospective buyer (including Prince Charles) had balked at the renovation required, Rolet didn’t blink. “It was a coup de coeur,” he says “it wasn’t a rational decision. But my family had made wine in this region and it was something I had always wanted to do. Moreover, I just had this overwhelming vision of what the house and the vineyard could look like and do. Both were diamonds in the rough. And while I knew it was a huge risk all round, I just instinctively felt that this particular terroir possessed something very special,” Rolet recalls.

His problem was how to make it happen. Rolet may have been cash- and passion- rich, but working for Goldmans and then running equities for Credit Suisse First Boston meant that he was increasingly time-poor. Fortunately, a solution was close at hand. He agreed with his sister Bénédicte Gallucci and her husband Jean-Louis, who were training as vineyard manager and winemaker respectively, that they would live on the property to make the first few vintages and see what kind of quality was possible.

A PERSONAL DOMAINE

An abandoned vineyard in the Vaucluse is now turning out award-winning wines - under the unlikely aegis of the London Stock Exchange’s CEO. John Stimpfig reports on the extraordinary success of Xavier Rolet and his wife Nicole have had with the Chêne Bleu label. Photographs by Jude Edginton.





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"At first, we sold off the grapes to the local co-op," says Nicole, herself a former investment banker, who married Xavier in 1997. "But with each vintage the quality just got better and better. It was around 2002 that we knew we were onto something serious. It's as if you have a child and a coach comes and says that your child and a coach comes and says that your child could be the next McEnroe, or the next Pavarotti. You feel you owe it to your child to let them explore this potential or you'll never forgive yourself."

The major turning point was the decision to build the winery. From that moment there was no deviation from their shared, obsessive mission to produce the best possible wine in the best possible way - with no shortcuts or compromise. Xavier and Jean-Louis designed the boutique, gravity-fed winery with help from leading oenologist Philippe Cambie of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and bought the best winemaking equipment they could find. The result is an oenologist's dream. By now, Nicole was also immersed in project-managing both the renovation of the house and the burgeoning wine production. She enrolled in courses in the UK, US and France to gain experience as vintner. She quickly discovered a huge passion for the subject and a naturally refined palate. "Unlike me, she started from scratch," observes her husband. "It's amazing what she has accomplished." However, the Rolets weren't entirely flying solo. In order to fulfil their fine-wine vision they brought in world-class consultants to question every aspect of what they were doing. One was acclaimed Californian winemaker Zelma Long, who has become something of a mentor to the team.



Another was Philippe Cambie, and his protégé Thomas Oui. In the vineyard, they enlisted Claude and Lydia Bourguignon, the renowned microbiologists and proponents of biodynamism, which now governs Chêne Bleu's viticulture. Long was immediately impressed by her new clients' meticulous and dedicated approach, which was the antithesis of so many "vanity" wine projects she had come across in California. "In Silicon Valley, the first thing they do is build a statement winery," she says. "Then they expect you to produce great wine the following vintage. The Rolets were the exact opposite. They began with the vineyard almost two decades ago and nurtured it until they knew exactly what it was capable of. If you are doing it seriously and with integrity, it has to begin with the terroir." Fortunately, Rolet's gut instinct had indeed struck gold. It turned out that La Verrière has a complex micro-geology of mostly clay and chalk limestone rock, unique to the Dantelles, which forces the vines to penetrate deeper in order to survive and prosper, thus exposing them to a treasure trove of minerals. Moreover, the excellent exposure ripens the grapes, while the altitude lengthens the growing season, which develops extraordinary levels of colour, tannin

and acidity in the reds. "The Dantelles don't yield great wines easily," says Rolet. "But when you plant in the right place and work hard, the results are amazing." Finally, in 2009, the first hand-crafted Chêne Bleu wines were released with the much anticipated 2006 vintage. There are just five wines in the debut range. The two flagship reds, christened Héloïse and Abélard after the famous medieval lovers, are made from very old, absurdly low-yielding Syrah and Grenache vines. An almost Burgundian-style white wine, Aliot, is produced from Roussanne, Marsanne and white Grenache. There is a 100 per cent Viognier, and, lastly, a food-friendly rosé. Immediately, the wines picked up a haul of medals in prestigious international competitions and caught the attention of several key critics. Some have hailed them as a new cult wine in the making. "The wines are exceptional in every sense of the word," says Decanter's Steven Spurrier. "I like them a lot and admire their style and the intelligent, haute-couture approach that has gone into making them. But they are certainly not your typical wines from Gigondas."

Some have criticised the domaine's controversial use of new oak barrels to age its Grenache, a practice frowned upon by producers in nearby Châteauneuf. But the Rolets make no apology for their atypical style. "Because of our terroir and the intense concentration of the wines, we felt they demanded this degree of oak treatment," says Nicole. "Essentially, we have taken all our winemaking cues from the vineyards." In point of fact, almost everything about La Verrière's modus operandi seems to work on a different level from the norm. That includes the odd family dynamic, which, 10 years on, continues flourish. "Yes, it's perhaps a little surprising," says Bénédicte Gallucci, "but I think it has worked because everyone found their niche. We all just naturally slotted into place. For instance, I wouldn't like to do Nicole's job, and I don't think she would like to do mine." Undoubtedly, Nicole's role has rapidly expanded as the project has evolved. Now she, rather than her husband, is the public face of both La Verrière and the Chêne Bleu brand. She's certainly the driving force when it comes to cross-pollinating ideas and marketing, both of which she does with consummate skill and an almost bewildering attention to detail. One example was the months of obsessive, painstaking research and brainstorming that went into the Chêne Bleu label. It was created by Nicole, who worked with design consultancy Amphora and the artist Jane Randfield. It is an engraved pastiche, with references to Hieronymous Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights. In the middle is the Chêne Bleu, and around it are the estate, vineyards, house and all principal elements and people that make up the project. Look closely and you'll see that Galluccis and the Rolets are all there, plus dozens of other tiny, significant and humorous, references.



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Xavier is dressed in his beekeeper's attire and a medieval Nicole is talking into her mobile phone while also spinning some plates. The image isn't just witty and visually arresting, it's authentic, intelligent and exquisitely executed. Perhaps Rolet's only regret is that he hasn't been able to be as closely involved at La Verrière as he would have liked, particularly since he took on his role at the London Stock Exchange. Even so, his wife points out that his stamp and vision are everywhere. "It was his dream and passion. He was the driver and the instigator. He was the one who set the crazy standard and the 25-year plan. But of course, the LSE comes first. So now he is more project mentor than anything else." Rolet does manage to spend some R-and-R time there with his beloved vines, trees and bees. "Xavier is a very complex, multifaceted person. And, at heart, he's very much a nature person," adds Nicole. "There's no question that he finds a sense of sanctuary, peace and equilibrium here that he hasn't found anywhere else." Although La Verrière is their spiritual home, the Pimlico-based Rolets make it available for private and corporate rental. In a former life, the multilingual Nicole was also director of programmes for various high-powered think-tanks. Old habits die hard - or not at all. Consequently, the property also hosts events ranging from fine-wine symposiums to corporate seminars and conferences. "Part of the appeal of bringing this place back to life was filling it with interesting people from all walks of life," says Nicole. "And it really does give

me huge pleasure to share this place, particularly with visitors and guests who understand and appreciate what we have tried to do here. La Verrière even has its own Latin motto: Non mihi, non tibi, sed nobis [Not mine, not yours, but ours]." Of course, wine is invariably part of the deal as well as the appeal. For the last three years, Nicole has run a luxury residential "boot camp" for oenophiles called Extreme Wine. It's an intensive and very serious programme, "where we essentially kidnap people for five days", she jokes. The course is run to Nicole's impeccable standards with expert tutors including Master of Wine Clive Barlow. What sets it apart isn't just the first-class instruction but also the hands-on opportunities in the vineyard, winery and tasting room, as well as trips to other world-class domaines in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. In fact, it's probably the best course of its kind anywhere in the world. How have they pulled the whole thing off with such style, taste and aplomb? "It takes a lot more than money," Nicole points out. "The project has been exhilarating but it has been more than a decade of relentless hard work involving more than 400 different contractors. On top of that, there were mistakes, moments of doubt and numerous sleepless nights," she admits. "And naturally, the locals thought we were insane. A lot of the time, it felt like a scene from Jean de Florette." Clearly, though, the gain has been well worth the pain. "I suppose we are at a stage when we can take

comfort from the fact that the vineyard is in great shape, the house and winery have been finished and the wine has been made," she adds. "But this is really just the beginning. There's still a lot to learn and a lot to do with each new vintage." So where does La Verrière go from here? Xavier and Nicole Rolet currently have no plans to grow the estate, apart from perhaps planting a few more hectares of white-grape vines, which would take them up to a tiny 35 hectares. "We're still focused on getting quality absolutely right rather than thinking of expanding the vineyard," she adds. As a result, the couple aren't signing quite so many cheques and will soon get a slight return on their investment when the extremely promising 2007 vintage is sold. But, given what must have been spent, Xavier Rolet is not looking to recoup his outlay any time soon. "Obviously, I am incredibly proud of the wines and all the serious work we have done here. But, in purely financial terms, let's just say it's a long-term family project. I think my children are probably thinking about it for their grandchildren." Domaine de la Verrière, 84110, Crestet, France (+334 9010 0630); www.laverriere.com (the estate); www.chenebleu.com (the wines). Extreme Wine 2012, June 17-21, places from €5100. Chêne Bleu is available in the UK from Justerini & Brooks (020 7484 6000; www.justerinis.com), Huntsworth Wine Co Ltd (020 7229 1602; www.huntsworth-wine.co.uk), Handford Wines (020 7221 9614; www.handford.net) L'Art du Vin (01383 873 510; adv.co.uk) and other stockists.