

EXPERIENCE EXTREME WINE, A PROVENÇAL ESCAPE

by Carolyn Kauser-Abbott



WELCOME TO WINE BOOT CAMP

Long before the existence of social media, the seven popes who directed the Catholic Church's activities from Avignon (1309-77) appreciated that the terroir of the southern Rhône was ripe for grapevines. During the Middle Ages, local monks survived off the scrubland and cultivated grapes under Provence's sunny skies.

However, it was Twitter that led me to the site of an ancient priory, a place with row upon row of budding grenache and syrah vines. Surfing the Internet, I stumbled across @ExtremeWineCB, a "handle" that I felt compelled to follow. Not satisfied with Twitter's 140-character limitations, I made contact with Karen Glennon, the Executive Director of Chêne Bleu's Extreme Wine, to understand more about its program in Provence.

La Verrière is located three kilometres from the hilltop hamlet of Crestet, on the northern edge of Provence, at the crossroads of several Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC or AC) wine regions. The Rolet family purchased the property in 1993 and, after an extensive renovation and construction project, unveiled their first Chêne Bleu wines (vintage 2006) to the market in 2009.



The team is focused on "Super Rhône wines made to organic and biodynamic principles." When you meet Nicole Rolet, you quickly recognize her deep understanding of the industry, a knowledge base that she has gained over the last 15 years. Rolet moved from investment finance and political science in New York City to London with her husband, and began a crash course to improve her understanding of the wine business. She rapidly determined that the classroom-based certification courses offered in London and San Francisco left gaps in her wine-industry comprehension. Not satisfied with the status quo, she worked with Clive Barlow, a Master of Wine in London, to develop a curriculum that complements the Wine Spirits and Education Trust (WSET) syllabus. The Chêne Bleu Extreme Wine experience, now in its ninth year, gives students a hands-on understanding of the wine business.

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The course at La Verrière is an intensive five-day immersion into wines of the world, a thorough approach to tasting wine and the art of pairing with food. Students also gain a hands-on appreciation for essential vineyard activities. What sets the Extreme Wine experience apart from the WSET certification, that you can take at most community colleges, is the holistic approach to the subject. In the high-tech conference room, Barlow and his fellow instructor, Nick Dumergue, walk students through the growing regions, grape types, various wine-making processes and spirits production. After a morning session of PowerPoint slides and wine tasting, the group assembles for an al fresco working lunch in the shade of a Linden tree to test their food and wine pairing skills.

The onsite chef team – a talented duo – prepares all meals for the week, rising to the daily challenge of pairing four-course dinners with that day's wine focus. Speaking on behalf of my fellow students and myself, I think we might have been prepared for the intense theory and wine tasting, but we weren't prepared to be served meals worthy of Michelin stars alongside some of the top global wines. We were fast learners, however. After the welcome dinner that included heirloom tomatoes stuffed with vegetable tartare, a six-hour lamb shoulder made with meat from the local shepherd, a cheese course and then a strawberry-filled almond crust with crème anglaise, we all knew that we would leave La Verrière feeling slightly snigger in our jeans.

La Verrière is the name of the property that includes the 35-hectare Chêne Bleu vineyard and contemporary wine-making facility. Extreme Wine attendees stay at the vineyard – practically a hamlet – where the main building can sleep 18 in five-star accommodations. The restoration and construction work of La Verrière took almost a full decade. The Rolet family is highly respectful of the site and its history as a medieval 9th-century priory, and as a glass production facility (1427) – hence, the name La Verrière. Today, more than 20 years after purchasing a ruin at the top of a 550 m hill, the Chêne Bleu team welcomes students, corporate teams, private families and exclusive tour groups to enjoy a glass of wine with an uninterrupted view of Mont Ventoux.

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Initially, I was reluctant to enrol in Chêne Bleu's wine course, as I rated my personal wine expertise only slightly better than basic. The WSET programs are offered in Calgary – would I come away from Crestet any more enlightened? The value for money proposition offered at La Verrière, and the full extent of the program, was not evident to me at the outset.

Looking back, I should never have hesitated. The Chêne Bleu Extreme Wine experience is a chance to appreciate the voyage of a grape, from the vine to the bottle to the hands of the consumer. Our group came together from India, Peru, the United States and Canada with wine knowledge that ranged from rudimentary to the presumed expertise of a winery owner and the publisher of *Sommelier India*.

Each day, we were treated to a visit from some of the top names in the wine industry, including Eric de St. Victor (Château de Pibarnon), Even Bakke (Clos de Trias) and Doug Margerum (Margerum Wines). During the week, we visited the Gabriel Meffre bottling facility in Gignondas (20 million bottles per year) and Château la Nerthe, a vineyard with nine centuries of history in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The group attempted to master the WSET systematic approach to tasting, and even had a chance to play wine-maker by creating assemblages of grenache, syrah and viognier.



Surrounding all of those activities was the luxury of La Verrière and its infinity pool▲ with its view of the vineyard – where the team at Chêne Bleu says, "Great wines are nurtured." ❁

WSET Calgary: finevintageltd.com/wine-courses/Calgary

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Clos de Trias: closdetrias.com/CdT_Web_Site/Welcome

Margerum Wines: margerumwinecompany.com

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