


**2017 BORSA VINI ITALIANI** **BORSA VINI ITALIANI 19th Jan 2017** [Register here](#)

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PEOPLE

# Nicole Rolet and the story of Chêne Bleu earning Super Rhône status







*If you were to visit Chêne Bleu today, tucked in to the foothills of Mont Ventoux, it would be hard to imagine a site that had been abandoned for years. Not only is it now a beautiful home for Xavier and Nicole Rolet, but it has been transformed in to a vineyard producing wines that have been awarded Super Rhone status by the world's top critics. Nicole Rolet shares her story with The Buyer.*



By [Richard Siddle](#)

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Dreams really can come true as Nicole Rolet looks back on how a determination to transform abandoned terroir in a forgotten part of the Rhône has resulted in international respect for Chêne Bleu.

The world of wine is full of magical, intriguing and inspiring wine stories. Or at least it claims to be. But how often have you been told what you are about to read is a “unique” tale of derring do, when actually it is pretty similar to a lot of other wineries and winemaking stories around the world.

So in danger of setting myself up for a fall, can I dare venture that the story of Rhône producer, Chêne Bleu, does actually live up to the ‘magical’ and ‘inspiring’ billing. It might not have felt like that for the owners and winemakers involved, but considering it only started making its own wine 10 years ago, and is already regarded as one of the most significant producers in the Rhône valley, then it must have been sprinkling some magic dust somewhere.

Such has been Chêne Bleu’s impact over the last 10 years it has already earned itself the status of being a ‘Super Rhône’ wine producer.

From abandoned vineyards and buildings the Rolets have built a beautiful home

It all comes down to the passion of Xavier and Nicole Rolet, helped and supported by their brother

and sister-in-law, Jean Louis and Benedicte Gallucci. They had the vision to start a winery at the medieval wine estate the Domaine de la Verrière, above the small village of Cretset, just where the Rhône and Provence appellations on the southern border of Gigondas meet.

Its vineyards are some of the highest in the area located 1,600ft in to the foothills of Mount Ventoux, Provence's largest mountains and a mecca for any Tour de France cycling fans. The site had been abandoned for years due to a family feud.

In fact no-one even wanted to live in the property that the Rolets have made their home. Xavier Rolet, who when he is not living close to Gigondas, is helping keeping the UK's finances in check as chief executive of the London Stock Exchange, told The Financial Times that the property had remained empty for some 45 years before they took it over.

Property might be pushing it a bit considering it only amounted to a "few walls of an abandoned priory, which were filled with piles of sheep dung".

Huge potential

He told the [Financial Times in an interview](#): "I

knew the area had potential because I talked to some of the old men around here and they said that even though the vines were now overgrown they had always made good wine."

It was the combination of high altitude combined with its limestone and clay soils that meant the estate had the potential to make great wines.

But this was no off-the-peg wine development and involved years of careful, painstaking redevelopment to not only build a family home, but turn the surrounding area in to vineyards capable of making the quality wine the Rolets and Galluccis craved.

Even that took time and most of the wines they produced for the first years were sold to local co-operatives. "It took us a long time to realise what we had our own diamond in the rough here, at the crossroad of a millennium of history, complex geology, unique biodiversity with these high altitude, old vineyards," says Nicole.

The chance to make "thinking people's wines" as she calls them.

Speaking out

Xavier and Nicole Rolet have brought what the critics have dubbed Super Rhône status to the region

The Rolets may be relatively new to winemaking in France, but they have not been shy about strongly criticising some of what they see as being antiquated and unnecessarily restrictive rules that dictate France's AOC system.

Straddling several appellations, including the up and coming Cotes de Ventoux, Chêne Bleu has chosen to sit mainly outside the AOC system. Nicole says it largely comes down to making wines that they believe are genuinely true to the land, the soil, and the climate where they made. Which might sound like a French terroir-driven approach, but is not in keeping with how she sees the AOC rules working.

She questions how the Gigondas can be seen as one appellation when it covers vineyards separated by the Dentelles de Montmirail, a small range of mountains, that mean some vines can sit in altitude in snow at up to 600m, whilst others lie in a valley at 250m. Yet be expected to sit within the same price and style range.

"We don't want to take on the appellation system.

We just think it needs a rethink. It needs to be better nuanced," she says.

It should, she believes, take more into account a wine's ability to age and be used to help consumers better understand the wines they are buying.

Why not use geographical pointers which consumers can easily understand, she asks: "In other countries, producers have come to refer to "Mountain Fruit" or Valley Fruit", which consumers easily associate with a fresher or richer taste profile and buy according to their preferences, pairing priorities, or mood".

As it stands producers and the wine trade are forced to "waste time and money" trying to explain what the appellations all mean, claims Role, whilst picking holes in each other in order to promote the area you are trying to sell. "They could," she argues, "be using those resources educating people more broadly about wine, helping them understand their personal preferences and building purchasing confidence."

It is part of the reason why she has also started her own wine school.

## Distinctive design

Chêne Bleu's unique and mysterious design adds to the allure of the wine

Chêne Bleu's marketing and packaging is also distinctive and been an integral part of its success. The illustrations and hidden symbols used to depict the vineyards and the workers play on both the area's history and tradition, but also help tell the story of the wine, and this fascination with an enchanted world of the blue oak tree – aka the Chêne Bleu.

There is no need for complicated descriptions of appellations. The illustration does the wine's talking for it.

## Working with Grenache

The iconic blue tree that gives the estate its name

Chêne Bleu's profile is also deservedly bigger than wineries with far longer pedigree and success, because it has been willing to not only speak out about some aspects of the appellation system, but looked to widen the debate about wine in general



and Grenache in particular.

In 2010 Nicole Rolet and Seguret neighbour, Walter McKinlay of Domaine de Mourchon devised and held the world's first Grenache Symposium where she was able to bring leading world experts in Grenache from winemaking, viticulture, consultancy and writing backgrounds together at the remote estate above Gigondas. It was clearly a pivotal and important moment for Chêne Bleu, but also, she believes, helped shape a different path for Grenache.

"Despite being one of the most widely-planted grapes, beloved to many winemakers, it was being seen as a filler grape with no real direction, focus or consumer awareness. Hopefully we helped put it back on the right course again," she says.

"Grenache, like Pinot, is like a method actor. It is different everywhere it is grown which makes it confusing for consumers at the beginning, but then pulls them in to understanding the importance of terroir to complement an appreciation of wine by variety."

She is a strong advocate for the global wine trade doing more to share ideas and experiences, and working together to make the pie bigger instead of

focusing on their own particular slice. She is greatly heartened by the fact it is no longer just New World winemakers travelling around Europe to learn how to make better wines. Old World winemakers are now expected to be doing the same the other way.

“If you are a Bordeaux winemaker you are now expected to have worked some vintages in the New World to be regarded as a top winemaker and that has to be a good thing, if anything because it makes you question how and why you do things, even it reaffirms your original ways,” she believes. “Inter Rhône has just inaugurated a great program to get young winemakers from the region to trade places with Rhône variety producers in California and Australians.”

Partly because it is challenging the status quo and traditional way of doing things, but also because there is so much, she says, to be learnt and shared for the benefit of all wine producers which can only mean better wines being made for consumers.

“Even though there’s no shortage of great wine, I firmly believe the world has more room for people who are trying to make the best possible wine from their region. There is now so much blurring between what was once seen as the Old and New

Worlds". She likes to see Chêne Bleu as being part of the New France, where it is able to question the norm and build on its heritage in a new, exciting and different way, sometimes integrating New World influences and sometimes just finding its own way.

"We are not seeing things as binary any more," she explains. This mindset, alongside praise for the wines from many top critics, probably contributed to the international press coining the term Super Rhônes, much as in the case of Super Tuscans, to capture the maverick but ultimately qualitative approach.

## Wines with altitude

She certainly knows how blessed they are to be able to make Grenache wines at altitude. "It is the manna from heaven," she says. Particularly with the fresh, natural acidity that will allow its wines to only get better with age, combined with the deep roots of its vines and the mineral notes it brings to the wine.

It is currently free to make wines that "straddle" both the Southern and Northern Rhône with

complex, fresh, pure wine styles encapsulated in its reds, the **Abélard** and **Héloïse** and white, **Aliot**.

First class wines, by Nicole's Virgin classification, that she believes strive to "always over deliver" at their two distinct price points.

10 years and counting

2016 was a historic year for Chêne Bleu as it celebrated its 10th vintage. Clearly a great milestone for Nicole and Xavier after all the years of toil to get there. She concedes they have made "incredible mistakes" along the way, and that it took some time for both local winemakers, never mind the wider wine world to understand what they were doing or take them seriously.

Initially I don't think people had a clear understanding of why we were so excited by the terroir," she recalls. It's why she says the first medals and awards it won for its wines were so important. "It went some way to prove that this was not just wishful thinking."

With its Super Rhône status and countless awards, there is no doubt the world of wine is convinced Chêne Bleu now knows what it is doing.

\* Chêne Bleu is available to the UK trade through [Justerini & Brooks](#).

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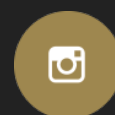


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**Why Chêne Bleu's**  
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