

# A Medieval Love Story

Lana Bortolot Contributor 

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*How a couple's labor of love turned an abandoned monastery into a regenerative wine farm*



Chêne Bleu is a sustainably farmed winery in Provence. CHÊNE BLEU

**Nicole and Xavier Rolet don't need to wait until Valentine's Day to tell their particular love story:** For them, it's a year-round affair—

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The couple—she is American and he grew up in France—met in 1994 and dated trans-Atlantically for three years before marrying and ending up in France. As newlyweds, their first project together was not picking out a house, but restoring one. And not just any house, but an ancient monastery in the Vaucluse region of Provence.

Xavier, former CEO of the London Stock Exchange, had fallen in love with the property when he saw the photo in a real estate agent’s office. “It had been abandoned a long time; it had no roof, and just a few chunks of walls,” he recalled.

Nonetheless, he acquired it in 1994 just before meeting Nicole. When he showed her pictures of the site, she was both under- and overwhelmed at the thought of committing to someone who had just committed his life to such a project.

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The state of the estate, as Xavier Rolet first saw it. CHÊNE BLEU

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“[It was a] complete and utter ruin of a house and a vineyard in the middle of nowhere on top of some mountain that no one had ever heard of (yet),” she said. “I panicked and thought of running for the hills. The plot twist is how I ended it up completely smitten with our family project, trading my urban life in finance for the remote countryside and winemaking.” They got married amidst the mud and the scaffolding on the ruins of the ancient priory.

The property lies in the shadow of Mont Ventoux, at 6,270 feet, the highest mountain in the region and which has been nicknamed the “Beast of Provence.” Local historians, Nicole said, have pieced together a site history dating to the 9th century. The priory was named La Regardette (“The Lookout”) and was a grape-growing dependency of the nearby Abbaye de Prebayon (abandoned in 1228 and now in ruins). In 1427, it was rechristened La Verrière when Aliot de Montvin, a nobleman who was also a noted artisan glassblower, established his workshop there and changed the name to the French term for a glass blowing workshop—the name still in use today by the Rolets.

Though generations of a local family passed down the estate, in the end, they were unable to keep it up. It was put up for sale in a state of disrepair.

Enter the Rolets. They set on a 12-year project to restore the property, building [Chêne Bleu](#), the winery, and renovating the former priory into [La Verrière](#), an eco-luxury guest house, assisted by family members who were expert in medieval restoration and Renaissance frescoes, and winemaking. Vines had already been established in the region since the Middle Ages and the Rolets saw the opportunity to restore that heritage, as well. They established the Chêne Bleu brand in 2006 and produced their first wine a

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the beaten path of the roses you find in [southern] Provence. From the get go, Chêne Bleu wines were not intended to be porch pounders.”



The ancient blue oak on the property at the center of sustainable farming practices. CHÊNE BLEU

Today, the estate is not only a modern winery—what Nicole calls “a winemaker’s winery, built by real winemakers, not consultants”—but a world-class hospitality venue with dining and accommodations, occasionally serving as a place for secret trysts for the rich and famous.

“Everything here is medieval meets modern,” she says.

She has been the spirit behind the branding, using medieval motifs for the wine packaging and to keep the site’s history top of mind. Two of the estate’s wines are named after the famous medieval lovers, Pierre Abélard and Héloïse d’Argenteuil—the French version of Romeo and Juliet—and one can’t help but be reminded of their story while wandering in the house.

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Nicole Rolet, co-owner of Chêne Bleu © SAEZ VICTOR

the fields. The Rolets created a wild boar “spa” on site in hopes of attracting the fierce rooters to a place of their own, instead of rooting around in the vines. Due to their efforts, the property attracts hundreds of registered species of butterflies, inspiring a partnership with the university at Avignon to research and help create a property census to survey animal counts, species and activities. Nicole herself has been knighted Chevalier of the Order of Agricultural Merit for ethical practices and social responsibility.

“We try to be as sustainable as possible,” she says, counting 75 acres of vine and 250 acres of sustainable forest under their stewardship. The grapes are organically certified, are bee friendly and Nicole says the winery is the only one in the world to hold the “very demanding Butterfly Mark” from Positive Luxury. Their practice is in sync with the region at large: The winery is within a UNESCO-recognized Biosphere Reserve and the Mont Ventoux AOC was the first to “set its purpose of strong environmental awareness.” And, now to secure that for Chêne Bleu’s future, Nicole is a fellow this year at Harvard University’s Advanced Leadership Initiative in a program to further develop a program for regenerative viticulture and “conversion to plant protecting practices.”

“We all should be upping the game, demanding better norms or else we’ll all be toast,” she said.

## WINES TO TRY:

**REDS:** **Abélard**, a Grenache-driven (85%) blend with Syrah made from

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A quartet from Chêne Bleu CHÊNE BLEU

Viognier. **ROSE:** “Le Rose,” a structured blend of Grenache Noir (60%), Syrah, Cinsault, Mourvèdre and Rolle.

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**Lana Bortolot**

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