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**CELEBRITY
DINING OUT
MINISTRY OF CRAB**

**ON TOP OF THE WORLD
RALPH D'SILVA**

**VROU
CELEBRATING
WOMEN**

**HSBC
GALLE
LITERARY
FESTIVAL 2012**

**INVESTMENT BANKER
TURNED WINEMAKER
NICOLE SIERRA-ROLET**

**CHAAYA TRANZ
HIKKADUWA**

**THESPIAN OF MANY
EXPRESSIONS
JOE ABEYWICKRAMA**

**HI!! EDITOR'S
BEST DRESSED
LIST 2011**

**KOLUU
LAUNCHES
'MY WAY'**

**COLOMBO
JEWELLERY
STORES
CELEBRATES
90 YEARS**

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CALENDER
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**EXCLUSIVE
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FRESHMAN
CASIMIRA
KARUNARATNE**



EXCLUSIVE

FORMER INVESTMENT BANKER
TURNED WINEMAKER

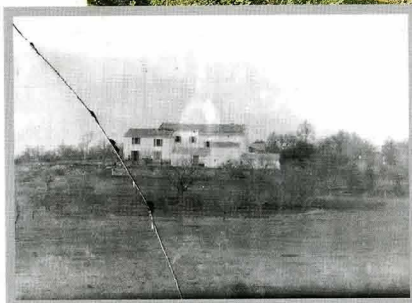
Nicole Sierra-Rolet

SPEAKS TO **Hi!!** ABOUT HER
WINE MAKING PHILOSOPHY



LA VERRIÈRE, PROVENCE,
SOUTH OF FRANCE

La Verrière, the historic bastide and medieval priory is located on 100 acres at the foothills of Mount Ventoux. The ancient estate was purchased by Xavier Rolet in 1993, and with his wife, Nicole, he began the ten year renovation of the medieval priory and vineyard to the highest international standards. La Verrière comprises several traditional stone and wood buildings, and the Chêne Bleu Winery is state-of-the-art.



Soft spoken Nicole Sierra Rolet with her kind eyes, ever-ready smile and modesty can, in minutes, change the way you look at the world. Passionate about what she does and believing in doing the best she can at all costs, Nicole exudes inspiration, hard work and commitment. In Sri Lanka accompanying her husband, London Stock Exchange CEO Xavier Rolet on a business visit, Nicole joined **Hi!!** to express her fervor about their own luxury wine brand Chêne Bleu and very boutique La Verrière estate which runs under their name.

Born in New York, bred in Italy, studying in the USA and now commuting between London, where her family is, and France, where her winery is, Nicole acts as the Principal of the estate. When her husband came across an abandoned property in the south of France, the former investment banker put the high flying business life aside to pursue a dream, and she is today a busy but content woman. After almost ten years of work, the property now produces award-winning "haute-couture" wines using natural and biodynamic techniques, hand-picked, and recognized internationally for its unique quality and standards.



NICOLE SIERRA-ROLET WITH
HUSBAND XAVIER ROLET



CHÊNE BLEU WINERY IS STATE- OF-THE-ART

So how did it all begin?

The property at which we have established ourselves has been around since the ninth century and has been called La Verrière for about 600 years and is situated in the Southern border of Gigondas in the region of Vaucluse in Provence. La Verrière is located in a beautiful protected UNESCO Biosphere reserve. My husband, Xavier was looking to buy an estate somewhere in the area

because of the beauty of the vicinity. When he came across La Verrière, it was completely abandoned and the vineyard was a real ruin. The house, with its own vineyards surrounded by forest, isolated from everything, looks like a little eagle's nest, and my husband fell in love with the estate. The vineyard though, was in such a bad condition, just like the house, abandoned for about 40 years. When we got it there was no water or electricity.

It had only been used by painters and hunters, mushroom pickers etc. A lot of painters have used the area and even Prince Charles painted the house in 1989. He was in love with the little enclave and wrote a beautiful paragraph about the house and the area as well. Everyone knew it was lovely and everyone wanted to buy it and fix it up but they knew it was going to take at least 15 years.

What made you bite the bullet and take it on when others, for years turned their heads?

They suspected the vineyards had good quality vines but because it was so far up in the mountains it was not highly productive in terms of quantity. So if you are just making regular quality wine you should just go to the valley because it is more efficient for machines; but if you are making high quality wine with handpicked grapes it is very exciting to be up in this area because it is isolated and we don't have to worry about what the neighbours are doing, ie staying with chemicals, polluting the water etc. Here today we use special natural techniques.

The yield is small but adds to the concentrated flavour grapes. Along with the quality of the soil and deep roots, it contributes to the richer and more interesting flavours of the wine made here.

All the ingredients to make this super high quality wine were already there but we needed to make the big decision of whether to leaving it alone or to go ahead by renovating and restructuring the whole estate. Half measures were not an option.

Was moving away from investment banking your first choice?

Initially I was in charge of fixing up the house and Xavier was in charge of renovating the vineyards. He kept bringing top oenologists for advice because it seemed that we had great potential, but he did not want to make the investment without proper validation by the top people in the world.

And when they did say we should build the winery, my first reaction was 'absolutely not; over my dead body.' My theory was if we are to do this we must do it right, stop everything, put in all efforts and give it full commitment. My husband convinced me to take a serious wine course and then make a decision.

And how did that go?

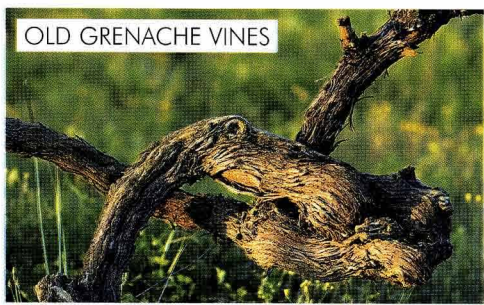
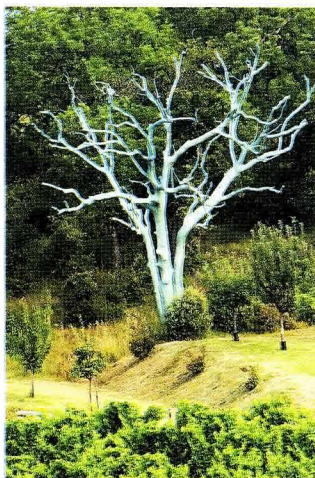
From my very first course I was completely bitten by the bug and this happens to a lot of people. They think they are not interested in wine but when they start learning about it, they get sucked right into it.

I had tried amateur wine courses and found them disappointing. They were very entertaining and enjoyable but not serious on the actual learning relative to the development of your own wine appreciation. They were good for anecdotes but not for helping me to remember things. I finally signed up at the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET), the worldwide licensing organization for the wine trade. It has different levels and depending on your position in the wine industry you are required to have completed the various levels of certification.

That was the beginning of the process. I did the levels and found it an absolutely fascinating field. It is very rare that people learn about wine and do not find it fascinating; it is an extremely interesting subject. I then decided to go to UC Davis, famous wine school in California and that enhanced my interest in wine making.

And then came the thumbs up for the project, yes?

Xavier's brother-in-law Jean-Louis and sister Bénédicte Gallucci came in and offered to help us with the project, and the four of us decided to build this winery. This was a serious commitment and we decided to reach for the highest level and take it as far as we could, which sat well with my personal aspirations.





Was this the only reason to take up the project?

Actually around the same time my mother passed away and it made me think about what I wanted to have done with my own life. I felt that many things in my life had aligned to suggest that winemaking would be my calling and I should make a full commitment to it. "I will take on this beautiful but abandoned property and take every aspect of it to the highest possible level I am capable of": that is what drove me.

I became super motivated and never looked back. This was about ten years ago. People thought this was crazy and impossible because of the amount of difficulty, work and risk involved. One of the satisfactions now has been making it happen against the odds. That is always a very profound feeling: to test yourself against the impossible. I stopped being a banker and dedicated myself to the endeavour,

full time and perhaps a little more. At the bank, I worked very hard and there were long hours, lots of travel and quite a bit of stress, but at the end of the year I got a big cheque with lots of zeros. In this job I work even harder, travel even more, except I have to write the cheques to other people. It is a different form of satisfaction. It is also nice to see it take off on so many levels simultaneously, like the reception by many critics, the international awards, the sales around the world.

How was it when you first started growing?

When you are making wine, unlike many other fields, you cannot control all the elements. You are so dependent on your raw material and on

conditions such as climate, soil etc. You are establishing a long-term partnership with the land, like a marriage. And for us we were renovating the house as well as the vineyard - everything required a lot of work. We had old scraggly vines, some 30-50 years old which were in bad condition when we started. To us they looked like little battered animals that needed to be loved.

How did you turn it all around?

We completely recreated the ecosystem around the property. We planted lavender, a bamboo forest that filters the water from the winery, and our own springs, a pond in which we have special fish to keep the vegetation in check. We have our own honey, fruits and vegetables, and lambs that come and spend the winter there. Since we stopped using chemicals all the animals came back. We were able to reinforce the whole system and bring these battered but beautiful vines to the condition which would give us really special grapes.

In this process, you are only as good as the weakest link in the chain; so if you do all this work to turn around your vineyard, but your winery isn't state-of-the-art, high performance tool then that would be a big disappointment. So we spent four years researching wineries and working with top experts. We ended up digging a huge hole four storeys deep to have a gravity-fed winery.



NICOLE WITH BUNCH OF GRAPES



SOLE HARVESTER PUSHING CRATES IN VINES





CONFERENCE ROOM TEACHING



You say Chêne Bleu is handmade wine. How so?

We actually do most of the vineyard work and all the harvest by hand. We bring in clusters like everybody but we then even do individual grape sorting, which is rare. We have eight people including me (I am actually a patient sorter) pick out the individual grapes that do not make the cut by our standards. This ensures that the fruit quality when we make the wine is at a very different level. It is an oenologist's dream because you are handing them such a carefully produced product. For me everything has to be perfect.

We put the grapes in mini fermentation tanks to control and jumpstart the fermentation exactly the way we want, and then put them in many medium-size tanks instead of a few big ones. This helps us control our winemaking and blending.



READING AREA

When you say blending, do you mix one year's with another?

Blending is fascinating but difficult. You are not allowed to blend one year's mix with another. In champagne yes, wine no. Wine is all vintage specific and most champagne is non-vintage. Only a few exceptional champagnes are. Champagne's goal is to make a uniform product, so blending helps. Wine on the other hand is to express the specificity of a vintage, of a place, of a winemaker so the philosophy of winemaking pushes towards a very clear identification of these elements, at the top levels.

If you are making cheap or normal wine it is more of a marketing decision, in which case you will work towards a more uniform, consistent product, but at the high levels of wine, you are trying to favour the expression of all those elements.

How wide is the gap between high level wines and mediocre wines?

It is like commercial art vs. fine art. At the high levels of art, the artists must have a distinct voice and creative input and say things that are special and different. Otherwise they will not be recognized at the top of their profession; and in winemaking it is the same thing. The middle level of wine has a lot in common with food. Good wine and good food are a perfect match. But fine wine has more in common with fine art- it becomes abstract, complex, becomes detached from the environment. You can appreciate great art even on a naked wall in the museum. It will keep talking to you and saying things and it does not have to be in context. If you learn about the context you appreciate it more. But it has to say a lot for itself and always say more. In fine wine at the top levels it must be the same thing. Great wines must be like great poetry. Like with music and art, people who do not have an appreciation in art or music feel they are leading full lives and don't know what they're missing. But if you do know, you will feel fortunate that you are fully enjoying experiences that people sitting next to you may be missing. In wine it is the same thing. Probably they are enjoying their food, but if you know what you're drinking it is enhancing your life experience to a new level. The big epiphany with wine is the first time a wine moves you. Enjoyment yes, pleasure yes, but being moved by a wine, having emotions stirred by a

wine experience is something that for most people require some degree of study and involvement.

When it comes to study, you also offer special packages to learn about wines at La Verrière?

Yes, because it is difficult to get to that level without some form of proper wine initiation. What I found frustrating is that so few wine initiation courses for enthusiasts are really thoughtfully designed to bring people to that level of that enjoyment. I thought it strange that wine has been around for so long and people are interested in it but so few proper courses are conducted. I couldn't find one so I decided to make one myself. I took the best instructors that I came across during my studies and set up the program. I designed the course with Clive Barlow, Chairman of Education at the Institute of Masters of Wine, an elite force in the world of wine.





And how is the response for the Chêne Bleu Extreme Wine Experience?

We have a good response from all over the world. And there is no specific requirement needed. They can be beginners, experienced collectors or those in between. The group is small, 12 at one time, and is very much like tutoring. Come in at whatever level you want and work to the next level.

The common denominator is the intensity of the learning experience. Because we work with small groups we can get them to progress together but at their own pace. It is really quite transformational. People have told us that it is the most incredible life experience they have had in many decades.

It is a full and very intense experience and not for the faint of heart. There are 100s of courses for the people who just want to enjoy themselves with their friends. Ours is for people who come with the single purpose of improving their wine knowledge, confidence and appreciation.



NICOLE SIERRA-ROLET AND VINCENT AVRIL PRESENTING HERO AWARD 'OSCAR'S'

you go to a new country it is not just about experiencing the life and culture but also engaging and exchanging your experiences and creating a dialog between people who have come together and with the community.

I am used to creating those situations and to capturing and sharing the outcome. I find it very interesting. People are who they are but you get to the essence of their beliefs by asking the right questions and creating the right environment. For me it is enjoyable because one of the things I love is the WOW factor in life, the experience, living on the edge and living life to the fullest. I want to offer the same thing to the people who stay with us. Not the usual experience! I like to take it several steps further and higher.

Any new trends you have noticed?

Women are taking over the wine world. It is fascinating to see exponentially more women getting involved in winemaking and expertise at many levels. Many women have a good palate; however they often lack the confidence and know-how, but when you give them the tools they are often very sensitive to wine appreciation and are able to communicate well.

Any last words?

I am very busy, as you can imagine. So I won't do anything unless I feel I am really adding something for people. The world does not need another wine, the world does not need another wine course, so you either do something right, or stay home or do something else.

CREATED BY FORMER INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT BANKER, NICOLE SIERRA-ROLET, AND CLIVE BARLOW MW, THE CHÊNE BLEU EXTREME WINE EXPERIENCE, DESIGNED FOR WINE ENTHUSIASTS OF ALL LEVELS, IS A FIVE-DAY IMMERSION PROGRAMME HELD IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE LONDON WINE ACADEMY IN PROVENCE IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE



How do you find this learning experience?

I was Director Programs in the Think Tank and so what is most important for me (and I think this is my personal value-added) is to bring people together with ideas. For instance, if it is for pure hospitality there are many beautiful hotels that offer good services. My objective is to offer world class hospitality but more importantly expose them to life experiences that would be gratifying for them. When

NICOLE SIERRA-ROLET AND VINCENT AVRIL RED CARPET MOMENT



THE FINALE DINNER AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE CHÊNE BLEU EXTREME WINE EXPERIENCE



TEXT: CHERANKA MENDIS