

Chêne Bleu - The Extreme Experience

Five days in a gorgeous estate by Mont Ventoux, tasting great wines from all around the world, under the leadership of two high-flying experts.

An unprecedented challenge, demanding as it is rewarding.

As you drive through the medieval village of Crestet (Vaucluse), the road snakes through kilometre after kilometre of countryside, a narrow corridor of pines, cistus, green oaks and heather. At the final bend in the road, a circus of grapevines surges from the ground under a great blue sky, flanked by the Dentelles de Montmirail and Mont Ventoux. These are the vineyards of Chêne Bleu. Another few hundred meters, and there before you is the villa and former priory, the extraordinary setting that plays host to the *Extreme Wine Experience*. Luxurious in its spaciousness, its silence, its preservation of nature, as it is in the beauty of its medieval architecture (restored in the 18th century), a sense of the *dolce vita* Provençale emanates from it. This is just the beginning of a five day adventure that only increases in intensity.

The Extreme Wine Experience is not designed to polish just any veneer of Bacchus-inspired thirst. It brings together all the great wine regions, all the world's great grape varieties, and it teaches how these wines should be tasted to be understood. There are between seven and eight hours of classes (in English) per day, interspersed with three to six daily tasting sessions and over a hundred wines, not including those that accompany the divine lunches and dinners, themed and prepared by the estate's private chef. First theory, then practice: six dishes, five wines, what pairs with what and why. The goal is mastery of the rules such that participants become confident enough to dare to try something new.

A chic-shock duo

Key to this intensive course is that in passing it you attain the internationally recognised WSET Level 2 award (Extreme Wine Experience participants have a 100% success rate), together with an Extreme Wine Experience certificate (in tasting, wine pairing, cellar management etc.).

The September experience brought together five self-taught wine lovers on a quest for a better approach to apply and express their passion. Amongst them, two Americans living in Switzerland (both with their spouses): James, a former investment banker, and John, a former head-hunter and member of the *Commanderie de Bordeaux* and the *Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin*. They were joined by David, an Australian expat in his forties living in London, the executive director of a renowned American bank and member of the very select wine club 67 Pall Mall. There was also the American couple Ann, and Elliott, the celebrity boss of a multinational corporation, newly retired (and who wishes to remain anonymous). These impressive résumés are much like that of the American founder of the Extreme Wine Experience: Nicole Sierra Rolet, former investment banker and director of David Rockefeller's training programs, joined by her husband, Xavier Rolet, CEO of the London stock-exchange, who took a new direction in life, taking on the La Verrière estate and creating their own domaine, Chêne Bleu wines.

Nicole designed the program in collaboration with Clive Barlow, Chair of the Education Committee at the Institute of Masters of Wine, and Nick Dumergue, wine expert and judge for numerous international tasting panels. A chic-shock duo – an Englishman and a New Zealander – highly experienced and for whom no question is too big or small. Nicole argues, in perfect French, that *'Sometimes, you find yourself faced with a grand cru that puzzles you like the Mona Lisa. You tell yourself that you really should be*

impressed, but you don't really understand, you're missing something. If an art expert explains "sfumato" to you, it changes everything. It is the same thing for great wines. In the same manner, it seems inconceivable to me that you might love literature without wanting to read the great works. It is the same thing for grand crus'. This is something particular to the Extreme Wine Experience: wines are brought from all terroirs, allowing participants to compare, for example, chardonnays from Burgundy and Australia of (very) high quality – Chassagne-Montrachet premier cru La Grande Montagne, Domaine Paul Pillot (Burgundy), Ermitage Les Greffieux de Chapoutier (Rhône), Farnese Colline Teramane (Montepulciano d'Abruzzo), Ridge Monte Bello Santa Cruz (California), Branaire Ducru (Saint-Julien) to name but a few.

A number of experiences round off Extreme Wine. Laura Catena of the famous Bodega Catena Zapata, explains winemaking in Mendoza by video-conference from her vineyard in Argentina. The neighbouring vineyard of the Duseigneur estate (Châteauneuf-du-Pape), at which Philippe Faure-Brac (the world's best sommelier) is a partner, shares its wines along with the Mourchon estate (Séguret) for a diner under the Chêne Bleu pergola. Visits to Gabriel Meffre and the Château La Nerthe illustrate two different types of winemaking, industrial and biodynamic. Over lunch there is the opportunity to savour the rare buttery and vanilla-flavoured white Clos de Beauvenir (3000 bottles) and the exquisite cuvée Les Cadettes de La Nerthe. On my visit, Ann, who arrived a neophyte, jumps out with a question for the the château's oenologist: *'How do you manage the fermentation of Grenache?'*

Dissecting the mechanisms of perception

One distinctive feature of the Extreme Wine Experience, the cherry on the top, is the fun factor. It is happily balanced (as we might say of a wine) with the rigorous and intensive character of the program. One afternoon as we enjoy aperitifs, sat by the pool as the setting sun enshrouds Mont Ventoux in purple, Nick, Clive and Hugo put together a blind tasting accompanied by three hilarious stories about the origin of the wines. Two are false, one is true, it's up to you to figure out which is which – 'Call my bluff'! What better way to carry on learning, even when you are not really thirsty any more!

The following day, there is a blind aperitif, literally, in pitch black this time, dissecting the mechanisms of perception. The final day, dedicated to exams, is a relief. For the gala diner, black tie is in order as the red carpet is rolled out. You understand at last why through the course of the week, Nicole did not hold back with the cinema references, beyond the fact that Clive is the doppelganger of Michael Caine (with less hair)! Who might embody Grenache? Penelope Cruz for her *volupté*. And pinot grapes? Jeremy Irons. The two sing from the same song sheet. And Merlot? Cary Grant. Nebbiolo? Marcello Mastroianni!

An extreme experience, with *'(oe)no limit'*, this most certainly is. It demands total engagement. The price tag is an incentive to this, a true reflexion of the excellence of the service, as well as the very high calibre of the instructors and participants of this very international boot camp.

The Extreme Wine Experience, €7500 (classes, accommodation, wine, and meals included).

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