

# VINTAGE TERRITORY

*The sensitive restoration of a ruined Provençal hamlet has extended to its surroundings: its vineyards, olive groves and lavender fields have been brought back to life, and its garden has been revived, with the lines of ancient terraces and drystone walls complemented by dramatic tree sculptures and softened by wild plants*



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**D**omaine de la Verrière, some 340 acres on a high hillside in northern Provence, looks out over the fertile Ouvèze valley and the silver peak of Mont Ventoux. An entire hamlet, with parts dating from the ninth century, it was in ruins when the Rolet family took it on in 1998. Today it presides over apricot orchards, lavender fields, olive groves, woodland and its own thriving vineyards – Chêne Bleu is one of France's most promising new wines, already winning prizes.

Buildings restored along a cobblestone lane allow for a sequence of protected spaces – perfect for the academic and cultural workshops and retreats that take place at La Verrière – such as the roof garden of the winery, a medieval herb garden, and an outdoor room with benches around a 'story-telling tree'. The ancient agricultural terracing has been strengthened with the best modern technology to shelter further gardens, including a walled potager and places for meeting and dining al fresco.

Owners Nicole and Xavier Rolet are multilingual and multicultural, experienced in international finance but also deeply appreciative of the values of terroir. Xavier conceived the plan, badgered the builders and designed the gardens. He insists on respect for ecological balance: the entire hillside is now part of a nature reserve, and Xavier has become a passionate beekeeper and birdwatcher. Life at La Verrière gives him energy for his main commitment – his job as CEO of the London Stock Exchange. His sister and brother-in-law, Bénédicte and Jean-Louis Gallucci, live on-site and manage the estate and the wine production year-round, while Nicole is the cross-pollinator and ambassador-at-large.

'We like to believe that there is a coherence to our world view,' she explains. 'We started with careful study of what was already here – the buildings, the lie of the land, the natural landscape – and built on this rich history. We feel this place has already got a very strong heartbeat, a very pronounced identity.'

In the gardens, this has meant keeping the topography intact, working with local plants, and accentuating existing features with strong structures, such as the sculptural trees. Throughout, there is a gentle transition from house to garden to nature. Olive trees serve as individual decorative features for inner courtyards, for

OPPOSITE A lime tree, reshaped by Marc Nucera, is flanked by his sculptures. THIS PAGE FROM TOP The hamlet sits among its own vineyards and woodland. Marc's Phantom plane tree stands behind lines of lavender. Drought-tolerant plantings include santolina, rosemary and *Rosa chinensis* 'Sanguinea'



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example, but become vast orchards in the surrounding landscape, while everywhere, the drystone walls are embellished with self-sowing *Centranthus*, hollyhocks, wallflowers, thyme, rosemary and borage.

The sculpted trees, like the benches, are the work of Provençal artist Marc Nucera. Just as the restoration of the stone-wall terracing has created clean lines and geometries, so his pruning of certain trees simplifies shapes and makes them pivots in the design – a dead oak painted blue, for example, has given its name to the wines of the domaine (Chêne Bleu), while the ethereal *Ghost* tree looms over the drive. In a stand of oaks at an intersection, Marc has pruned one close to the path into a complex sculpture, gently shaped those beyond and left the most distant ones alone. The ground below has been naturally colonised by white-flowering clover, the perfect foil for the art. His masterpiece, however, is a clearing named *Wood Henge*, a circle of sculpted benches from which there are magnificent views at the top of the hill.

Many spaces on all levels are multipurpose. Nicole and the Galluccis may host a crowd of farm workers harvesting grapes one day and an international think tank the next. The professional kitchen also allows maximum flexibility.

Everything at La Verrière unites, as Nicole explains, ‘the best of the bottom-up approach, working with the people who know this region, these grapes, this history, this land, with an international, top-down approach, choosing the best people, materials and practices for the job. The result is a truly inspired “global village”’ □

*Domaine de la Verrière: 00-33-490 10 06 30; www.laverriere.com; www.chenebleu.com*

## Throughout La Verrière, there is a gentle transition from house to garden to nature

THIS PAGE *Wood Henge* (top), a circle of sculpted benches at the top of the hill, was made by Marc Nucera using plane wood. Examples of Marc’s sculpted pines (centre and bottom left) illustrate the relationship between nature and sculpture. The walled potager has a sheltered position on the ancient agricultural terracing. OPPOSITE The blue-painted oak inspired the name Chêne Bleu, given to the domaine’s wines

