

CONTRIBUTORS



STEPHANIE DRAX
Travel writer

Stephanie Drax's first travel writing opportunity took her on a luxury safari to South Africa – so it is hardly surprising that she was instantly hooked. Firmly 'nestled into the niche of luxury travel', Stephanie writes and edits for various publications, as well as running VisionAir Films, a production company that creates city guides. Watching the sun set over Mount Fuji has cemented Japan as a firm favourite with Stephanie, who says she was 'bowed over by the customs, courtesies and deeply dignified characters'. Currently top of her travel wish list is trekking in Bhutan; in the meantime, read about her experience of a specialist wine holiday on page 140. When not travelling, Stephanie likes her London home 'minimalist and calm, but with a splash of colour'.

Three things you never travel without? 'Mineral sunscreen, a baseball cap and a wide-brimmed hat – I'm mildly obsessed with sun damage!'



CLAIRE PTAK
Baker and food writer

Californian Claire had her first job in food at the tender age of just 12, after placing an advertisement in the local paper looking for opportunities to help with catering work. Since then, she has opened Violet bakery in east London, written numerous cookbooks and made a name for herself as a food writer and stylist. American chef Alice Waters, pioneer of the Seventies organic food movement in California, is both a friend of and mentor to Claire, who worked as a pastry chef at Alice's restaurant Chez Panisse. The West Coast lifestyle has influenced Claire's take on classic American recipes (from page 127).
Your favourite treat from Violet? 'The coconut cream cake' ☐

DOMINIC COLE
Landscape architect

If you do not recognise the name Dominic Cole, you will certainly recognise some of the gardens that he has designed – the Eden Project is perhaps the most famous one. As for his favourite historic project, the choice is clear: 'Lowther Castle (on pages 118-125) as we got to reveal the remarkable seventeenth-century garden.' Dominic, who is also president of The Gardens Trust, draws inspiration from far and wide, citing Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx's historic Italian gardens and the artworks of Eric Ravilious as influences. *Ceratostigma plum-baginooides* is the flower that has caught his attention most recently, though he hastens to add, 'Choosing a favourite plant is like choosing a favourite child.'

Your favourite historic era? 'The late 1600s or the early 1700s – I love the style, innovation and intricacy. Though it must have been fairly ghastly when you think in practical terms.'



WORDS: LEANNE WALSTON. PHOTOGRAPH: KRISTIN PEREIRA (P. 140)



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WINE COURSE

AT A PROVENÇAL WINE ESTATE, **STEPHANIE DRAX** LEARNS HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM FINE WINE - AND IS REWARDED WITH A DIPLOMA

As we dine outside under a linden tree - feasting on fine wines paired with exceptional French food - and look out at the panoramic view of immaculate vineyards, I find myself casually learning all about taste and terroir. This is what student life is like on the Chêne Bleu Extreme Wine Experience at La Verrière in Provence. It is a class - with class.

Ten eager pupils, from neophytes to seasoned collectors, have journeyed to this remote 450-acre hilltop estate to learn about wine at warp speed. This is the tenth anniversary of the course and our very international group consists of a young entrepreneur, a clutch of retirees, and those who work in law, finance and law enforcement. La Verrière promises us all the frills - an elegantly restored medieval priory to stay in, replete with infinity pool and private chef, and the prestigious Chêne Bleu biodynamic vineyard and winery on our doorstep.

The five-day immersion covers a wealth of wine knowledge, including grape varieties, wine regions and label terminology, viticulture and winemaking. I am even offered the challenge of blending my own wine (a fruity little number with Syrah, Grenache and a dash of Viognier). The course ratchets up in intensity and culminates in a one-hour exam to attain the internationally recognised Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) Level 2/Intermediate award. No one has failed the test after completing the course here (reassuring, given the price tag) and all go home with enough knowledge to test a sommelier.

A lavender-lined path leads to a state-of-the-art teaching and tasting room, our daily hub for lessons. We taste and evaluate over 100 wines on an upper spectrum of quality, refining our noses, palates and descriptive vocabulary with each one. We agree that the 1985 Château Montrose, a superior Bordeaux wine from Saint-Estèphe, has 'spice' on the nose and the 'vegetative, mushroomy quality of the forest floor' - or *sous bois* - on the palate. The 2006 Dom Pérignon Champagne has a gentle fizz or mousse, with olfactory notes of 'light butter, nut and bread'. My spittoon is quietly sidelined.

As we students grapple to express aromas and flavours, our two highly qualified instructors are forgiving: Clive Barlow, a Brit, is chairman of education at the Institute of Masters of Wine and one of the world's 355 Masters of Wine, and Nick Dumergue, a New Zealander, is an experienced wine tutor and judge. They have honed the course with Italian-American Nicole Rolet, a former WSET student of theirs in London, who owns La Verrière. They make a dynamic trio, offering a perfect balance of structured education and prankish humour: one evening we are blindfolded to heighten our senses for an *apéritif au noir*.

A field trip to other nearby wineries reveals the splendid countryside of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The majestic subterranean cellar of Château La Nerthe is shrouded in dust and atmosphere. Nicole has organised a gourmet buffet lunch for us in one of the château's grand, light-filled rooms with Ralph Garcin, the chief winemaker, introducing his estate's esteemed vintages. We chink crystal to one of several rare experiences offered by Chêne Bleu, one sip closer to our hard-earned diplomas. (And reader, I passed with merit.)

WAYS AND MEANS

Stephanie Drax travelled as a guest of La Verrière (020-7233 8810; laverriere.com), Eurostar (03432-186186; eurostar.com) and Voyages SNCF (0844-848 5848; voyages-sncf.com). Train fares from London to Avignon cost from £99 return on Eurostar's direct service or from £121 return via Paris or Lille. The next Extreme Wine WSET Level 2 course is on June 23-29 and costs €7,500 (or €5,950 for *House & Garden* readers if booked before February 28, using the code H&GXW2018). Private courses can be arranged on demand □