

# Les Wineries du Rhône

**Cohola**



## THE MUSIC OF NATURE

Cheli Alberca and Jérôme Busato first met in college in Andalucia. They went on to set up their own négociant business, Maison Rouge, and acquired a wine estate in Sablet – all designed to gladden our hearts.

Here, the old adage *bonus vinum cor hominis laetificat* – good wine gladdens the heart of man – is more of a mission statement. Even the estate name, Cohola, is based on it. Cheli was born in Andalucia, in the Montilla-Moriles appellation. Although her family doesn't work in the wine industry, Cheli's father taught Cheli and her 6 brothers and sisters to appreciate wine by giving them each a barrel of it to look after. After graduating from business school, Cheli worked in a bank. Sadly, it didn't inspire as much enthusiasm as she had hoped, so she left, and went to join Jérôme in France. At the time, Jérôme was starting out as an agricultural engineer and oenologist, and was based in Bordeaux. Together, the pair travelled to Burgundy, where Cheli got down to work, discovering the vineyards and wineries and helping with vinification. But they missed the sun, so they headed back south, this time to the Rhône Valley, where Cheli got a job with the Perrin family at La Vieille Ferme while Jérôme worked for Maison Picard at Grandes Serres.

### Proving her worth

Cheli took a two-year course at the Agricultural High School in Orange to complement her hands-on experience – to dot the i's and cross the t's, and put into

words what she had learned in the field. And to be able to show that she was a real winegrower, that she knew what she was talking about. "Because," she explains, "when you're a woman clients like to test you. They ask questions to make sure you really know your stuff. It's no surprise really – people tend to picture men doing vineyard work and making wine."

To start with, Cheli and Jérôme set up a négociant business, Maison Rouge: in 2002 they were selling Côtes du Rhône, Vacqueyras, Gigondas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines in bulk from the kitchen and guest bedroom of their home in Bédarrides, while dreaming of owning their own wine estate. They achieved their dream in 2013, acquiring a 9-hectare organically farmed property in Sablet, one half of which was vineyard, the other half cherry trees, beehives, olive groves and truffles. They began making Côtes du Rhône Villages Sablet wine in red, white and rosé.

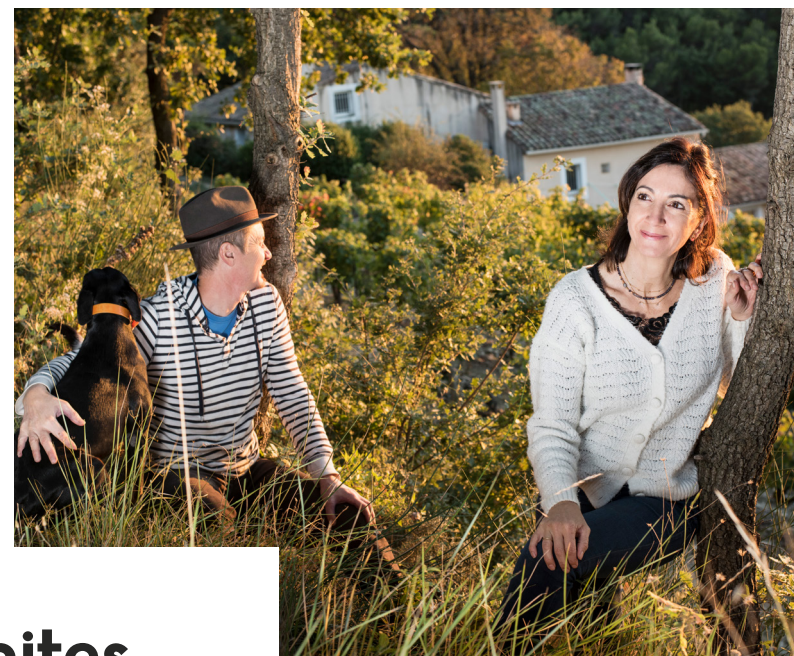
### A team of women

The négociant business and estate are now managed by a team of eight, six of them women. Cheli and Jérôme have split their clientele in two, looking after one half each. "Whenever we were together, in a meeting or at a trade fair, I noticed people paid more attention to Jérôme than to me," explains Cheli. "I decided it should be either him or me." Cohola is a small estate, and everyone has to be able to turn their hand to everything, from tending vines to dealing with customers, from making wine to doing accounts. When it comes to multi-tasking, Cheli feels women are more flexible than men. And it was Cheli who, seeing that all their red wines were aged in barrels, took the decision to make an unoaked range with the focus was purely on fruit. It's clear from both sides of the business that the popularity of fresh, elegant wines is growing day by day, and that demand for whites is rising – at the expense of reds.

**Cheli Alberca and Jérôme Busato**



**Established:**  
**January 2002**  
Employees: 8  
2020 turnover: €3.2 million, of which 35 % from export



**"Our whites are selling better and better. We run out of stock fairly quickly."**

### Environmental management

Buying an organic estate was very much a reflection of the couple's values, although they're aware it's perfectly possible to make a bad organic wine as well as a good one, and that wherever you are, quality is determined

by terroir and the winemaker's input. Cheli and Jérôme farm their estate biodynamically, enriching the soil with beneficial bacteria and fungi to add as much life to it as they can. They follow the lunar calendar, harvesting and bottling on fruit days, pruning on root days and carrying out other work on leaf days. "We're not totally convinced it makes a difference," says Cheli, "but it gives us a good framework and a structure to work to."

Jérôme and Cheli have recently installed a genodics system, treating the vines to seven minutes of music twice a day, morning and evening, played through solar-powered speakers. The technique is based on the quantum physics theory that everything can act as a wave. The sound is said to disrupt the proteins of hard-to-treat viruses such as esca or brushwood disease, which can be tricky to resolve organically. Since they installed the system, the couple have noticed a significant increase in leaf growth. It seems that the vines like it!



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