



# ROPE DYE

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## CUTTING TO THE CORE OF THE MATTER IN THIS EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: WOLFGANG LANTELME OF PASSIONFRANCE

We talk about culture, craft and knives with Wolfgang Lantelme, the man behind the blade.

A fashion trade show is kinda nuts. There's hustle and bustle, pomp and splendour. Everyone is running this way and that. Collections are being shown, buyers are buying, sellers are selling, the press is pressing... ok, you get the idea. It is a circus! So any respite is more than welcome.

Since my time working for the Selvedge Run, my little oasis of tranquillity was to be found at the PassionFrance® booth. Founder of PassionFrance® Wolfgang Lantelme and his partner Sabine Eigner transport the calm of a picnic in the Auvergne to the trade show circuit of Berlin. But they are not blanket makers, they are certainly not part of this whole Glamping movement. No, they sell knives.



Knives must be one of mankind's earliest inventions and certainly one that has had a huge influence on society and culture. It is a tool, and given the importance of such a tool, it stands to reason that certain knives have grown and evolved in lockstep with certain cultures, tasks, traditions and regions around the globe.

## Form evolving with function

PassionFrance® concentrates on the traditional, regional knife designs of France. Their range is a little overwhelming when you first look over it. But after a short chat with Wolfgang, I began to see a pattern of practicality, tradition and craft. Each design and variation has a purpose. Each design has evolved to suit the needs of the region from which it hails. This is the true definition of form evolving with function. But as much as this serves a practical need, these are tools that are carried with a person throughout their lives. One of their functions is to be beautifully crafted objects. It adds a depth to the designs that are only found in these traditionally crafted objects.

Now, I would love to tell you this tale the way I heard it. Namely over several glasses of wine, generous helpings of cheese and fresh bread and a chat with friends. To bring something of the vibe, I will give you a moment to raid the fridge, gather the wine and cheese.

You're back, good. I will let Wolfgang tell you the story of PassionFrance® and the craft and dedication behind it.



## Take it away Wolfgang!

Looking back over the year, my life has been the constant search for creativity, especially in regards to the objects we use daily and that accompany us through our lives. I studied architecture at university which was a great experience, but I chose not to follow a straight, predetermined career path. Like many others in my generation, I saw that this would only narrow my perspective and stifle my creativity.

This meant that we travelled a lot, we jumped into my beloved 2CV spending a lot of time in Italy and more and more, we found ourselves in France. This brought a lot of good friends into our lives.

The little knife in my pocket, a gift from my father, became an indispensable companion. It allowed us to picnic together which is a fundamental part of the French way of life.





## A right of passage

They call it “casse-croûte” when friends gather together, they open their personal pocket knives and share bread wine and cheese. There came a time when my friends decided it was time that I had a “real knife”. They presented me with my very own Laguiole. This is more than a simple friendly gesture, in France and in particular the Auvergne, it is an act of friendship, a right of passage that integrates a person into the family or circle of friends. This symbolic act goes back generations and is a deeply rooted part of the culture.

But that is life and then there is business. My curiosity drove me to deal with interior design and objects that we use daily.

The phrase “to deal with” it seems to me to be the perfect term firstly because it describes an intellectual process and secondly because it describes the fact that I started two retail stores focusing on objects inside the house where I “dealt with”.

At the end of the 80’s my ex and I expanded our shops with imports from other European countries. As the European community was not yet an open trade area, it was a great opportunity to learn about the difficulties and constraints found in daily business. We were honoured to distribute a number of iconic products from the most important French designer at this time, Phillippe Starck.



## Bringing back the Laguiole to Laguiole

For 80 years, the production of the iconic LAGUIOLE knife had been done in Thiers, but at the beginning of the 90s, a friend brought the production of the famous knife back to the village of Laguiole. This repatriation back to their village of origin ushered in a new era of quality and craft in the production of these knives under the roof of an atelier created by Philippe Starck.

A friendship blossomed and over the next 12 years I built up the brand in the German-speaking market. When the company was sold off to an investment group the cooperation came to an end but it was the beginning of PassionFrance®.

## Starting with Passion

With PassionFrance® we searched for other knives native to particular regions. These knives carry with them a history of culture and tradition. They are not only practical tools but beautiful objects that our customers cherish. They love to have a piece of France and its charm in their pockets.

At first, First PassionFrance® cooperated with traditional knifemakers. They produced special series of these traditional regional knives at higher quality standards as they had been produced for French customers up to that point. It was a period of educating and increasing skills/abilities of the craftsmen.

## Award-winning craftsmanship

For years I have been friends with Robert Beillonnet. Robert is the two times winner of the “meilleur ouvrier de France”. A prestigious award that is given to the finest craftsman in France. We worked together in the creation of a new LAGUIOLE. This LAGUIOLE won the “International Knife Award” in 2010 and was honoured with the additional award “Knife of the Year 2010”.

Putting such an ambitious knife into production, however, seemed nearly impossible. Only the very best cutlers were able to produce such a knife and only in the smallest of quantities. Nevertheless, I was still determined to widen our selection and bring this selection up to the standard of quality of that LAGUIOLE. The search for a talented individual able to realize that challenge began.

It took two years and it was serendipity that brought me together with Jo Alvez. Jo now produces all 5 models of PassionFrance® knives. All of which are designed by Robert Beillonnet, in his little atelier. Step by step, we are replacing the first traditional models once produced in other cutleries by our own production. Again on a higher standard.





Jo Alvez is the nephew of the well known Angel Navarro. Angel trained the most famous, most respected cutlers of France. As a child, he was already part of Angel's atelier and learned the craft of knifemaking from his infancy. At 36 years old and part of PassionFrance® he now has all freedom to put in practice his abilities and ideas.



## A closer look

Let's take a closer look at the LAGUIOLE. This knife was born around 1850 in the little village Laguiole in the Massif Central, a rural volcanic region. The knife would accompany its owners throughout their lives. Being used daily in the garden, in the stables, in the kitchen and at the table.

From its birth, the LAGUIOLE was an amazingly slim and elegant knife. From 1880 to 1900 it changed its line and replaced the traditional blade called "Bourbonnais" into a blade called "yatagan".

This modified new model won various awards during several agricultural shows in France at the end of the 19th century and because of this, it was discovered by aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The LAGUIOLE became a "must have" in Paris and took off on its triumphant course. Soon it became favourite all around France. Found in the pockets of men and the handbags of women, It became indispensable.

When a corkscrew was integrated it was given the nickname "survival knife". This perfectly illustrates the French way of thinking and living.

A traditional "LAGUIOLE 1-piece" which means just with a blade. Today it looks like this.



The traditional “LAGUIOLE 2-pieces” adds a corkscrew with the blade



You immediately see the differences in the line. The LAGUIOLE PassionFrance® is less rustic, its line follows more the ancient pristine idea of elegance. The “survival” avoids the heavy crack on the back maintaining the line of the LAGUIOLE 1-piece. This was precisely the groundbreaking innovative idea of Robert Beillonnet when creating a LAGUIOLE for PassionFrance®. It is unique and I could, fortunately, get legal protection for this design.



## Big steps forward

Both in technical terms and in its construction we made a big step with this model. One of the “traditional” problems with most regional knives is that the blade edge hits the resort when being closed. The resort is the spring that holds the knife open or closed. We solved this problem by inserting a pin that meets the ricasso (the unsharpened length of the blade just above the guard or handle on



a knife, dagger, sword, or bayonet). Both meet perfectly when the blade is closed and means that the blade edge can never hit the resort. The blade will always remain in a perfect position. This is not the simplest or the cheapest solution, but it explains perfectly the uncompromising levels of design and quality standards we strive for at PassionFrance®

The LAGUIOLE PassionFrance® is just one in a series of knives that Wolfgang has worked on with Jo and he will strive to bring this quality to many more designs as the range develops.



## **There are a lot more knives on offer, folks!**

I would encourage you to head over to the PassionFrance® website. Since starting this article with Wolfgang, my interest and appreciation for these traditional knives has grown and I have learned a great deal about the traditions and craft surrounding these knives from the website. It a wonderful resource with images and information on all the knives on offer.

Now, just to round this off. I would be remiss if I did not include a word of warning. The rules and regulations around carrying a knife vary greatly the world over. What is a perfectly acceptable accessory for opening wine and cutting bread and cheese in France will land you a custodial sentence in the UK. If you are going to invest in a knife, make sure you know exactly what you are allowed to carry around with you in your country, state or city. I don't want to hear that any Rope Dye readers have been banged up for partaking in this little piece of French tradition.