



WHO:

Dutch entrepreneur
Jan van Grinsven
and his wife José

WHERE:

Château les Merles
in Mouleydier,
Dordogne

WHY:

The family was ready
for a new challenge

STYLE:

Neoclassical French
château with a chic,
modern interior

Dutch
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estate in September 2003, there
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courage
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that did not need renovation”

WORDS: PAOLA WESTBEEK

Idyllically perched on a hilltop in the village of Mouleydier in Dordogne's lush Périgord Pourpre, Château les Merles exudes a harmonious mix of neoclassical elegance and country charm on the outside, and exquisitely refined contemporary taste on the inside. The owner of the four-star establishment, Dutch entrepreneur Jan van Grinsven, had spent eight years sailing around the world entertaining guests on a 35-metre luxury yacht when he decided it was time to start a new venture with his wife José.

Jan grew up in the southern Dutch city of Oisterwijk, not far from his native Tilburg. In the Netherlands, people from the south are often said to be 'Burgundians', a term used to describe those who enjoy the good life and the pleasures of food and drink. It hints back to the time when the dukes of Burgundy (who revelled in a most opulent lifestyle) ruled the country.

There is certainly no denying that Jan is a true 'Burgundian'. His face lights up with excitement as he talks about his passion for cooking and proceeds to describe his favourite dish: crisp, oven-baked *fleurs de courgette* stuffed with a delicate mix of mushrooms and served with a thick, hearty chanterelle sauce. "I grow the courgettes myself in our organic vegetable garden," he says proudly, before going on to explain how the courgettes produce their bright yellow blooms. The dish - it does indeed taste as good as it sounds - is one of the many elegant starters at

Restaurant Les Merles. Operating under the creative culinary mind of talented chef Bas Holten, the Gault Millau restaurant serves modern regional cuisine made exclusively with home-grown and locally sourced ingredients. For Jan, it is the "heart" of his luxury hotel which boasts 14 rooms, an apartment, eight villas (and counting) and a nine-hole golf course.

The story of how Jan traded his life as captain of a yacht for that of hotel owner in rural south-west France is the perfect example of someone who is not afraid to chase dreams and take on new challenges, no matter how daunting they may seem. In 1994, Jan sold his successful textile company and enrolled in nautical school, determined to make one of his childhood fantasies come true. Two years later, he obtained his captain's diploma and fell in love with a vintage 1940s Camper & Nicholson's yacht which he then fully restored to its former splendour, updating it with all of today's modern comforts.

What followed were some of the most memorable years of his life, navigating through the oceans with his beloved José as they pampered guests from every corner of the world. "I can write books about that wonderful time," Jan recounts. He knew, however, that his career as captain would not last more than a decade. "When I asked José for 'permission' to follow my dream," he jokes, "she agreed, but only under the condition that our maritime adventure would last a maximum of 10 years."



Above centre: One of the sitting rooms combines both classic and modern elements
Above right: The still life painting of fruit provides a shot of colour to the château's interior
Bottom right: An antique wood-burning stove gives a nod to days gone by
Bottom far left: The Van Grinsvens enjoy making music, especially on this classic grand piano
Bottom left: The hotel rooms exude understated elegance



The guest suites have large windows that let in plenty of light

"Deep pink Louis XV armchairs with golden framing form a bold contrast with the subdued palette of black, white and grey that characterises the rest of the space"



ON DRY LAND

In the early 2000s, realising his days at sea were numbered, Jan started to ponder what to do next. Running a hotel seemed like the most logical option. During his time as captain, he had developed a special liking for the art of hospitality: "Ultimately, I noticed that I took more pleasure in spoiling guests than in the actual sailing part." Together with José, their two daughters and one son-in-law, Jan spent two winters travelling through France and Spain in a careful quest for the perfect property and location. In total, the Van Grinsvens covered some 16,000 kilometres before discovering an abandoned 17th-century estate surrounded by the undulating vineyards of the Bergerac wine region. Originally owned by Joseph Babut,

the property was renovated in the early 19th century by Baron Mesclap, one of Napoleon's generals.

Though the property was not much more than a ruin, the location was splendid and the possibilities endless. "When we purchased the estate in September 2003, there wasn't a single square inch that did not need renovation," Jan explains. In the former barnhouse (now the restaurant), for example, the walls were in such bad shape, that a steel construction needed to be created inside of them in order to support the thick concrete floors and roof. With an impressive level of enthusiasm, the entire family rolled up their sleeves, hired some extra help and managed to get the place up and running just eight months later in May 2004. ▶



OLD AND NEW

Jan's brother, designer and interior architect Joris van Grinsven, arrived from the Netherlands in order to take care of the design of both the hotel and the Van Grinsvens' home. Though the decor is modern chic, original elements that were still in good condition, such as wooden doors, beams and rustic fireplaces, were retained in order to preserve the property's historic charm.

Each room attests not only to Joris's keen ability to create a sense of light and space, but also to José's superb taste. In one of the couple's sitting rooms, deep pink Louis XV armchairs with golden framing form a bold contrast with the subdued palette of black, white and grey that characterises the rest of the space. A large still life with abundant fruit provides an extra dash of colour, while delicate white orchids add a soft, feminine touch.

In another room, antique pieces such as a large chopping board and a quaint wood-burning stove placed next to a stone sink, make one daydream about what cooking would have been like in bygone days. The guest rooms exhibit the same degree of understated elegance with black wooden floors, modern furniture and large windows that let in the plentiful, golden sunlight and afford panoramic views of the surroundings.



OUTDOOR LIFESTYLE

With the long, beautiful summers and short winters that are typical of the region, it is no wonder that Jan likes nothing more than spending time outdoors. A typical day starts in his bountiful *potager* where he lovingly tends to his produce. “Nothing compares to the tomatoes I grow myself,” he says. “Their taste is just phenomenal.” Jan, a self-professed “vegetable freak” who believes in eating less meat and fish, likes to harvest early in the morning. What isn’t used by the restaurant or family, is often left in the courtyard for guests to help themselves to. If he isn’t gardening, Jan can be found in a state of zen riding on his lawn tractor or mingling with hotel guests. “They always start to wonder if they haven’t seen me around for a day,” he says.

When asked why he chose to live in this part of France, he replies without hesitation: “This is so much like the village where I grew up during the 1950s. Time has stood still here. People are friendly and laid-back. I like that there is no crime or traffic, and that shops close between midday and two o’clock in the afternoon.”

Another contributing factor to his affection for the region is wine. Bergerac boasts 13 unique *appellations* that produce fruity reds, crisp whites, refreshing rosés and aromatically sweet wines. The wine region, similar to Bordeaux in terms of soil, climate and grape variety, has little reason to envy its prestigious neighbour to the west. Jan is a fervent promoter of Bergerac wines and can wholeheartedly attest to that. He even purchased a three-hectare vineyard plot from the neighbouring wine producer. Originally, the restaurant’s wine list only featured Bergerac wines, but at the request of local guests, he decided to broaden the selection to include other French wine regions as well. As for which wine he prefers to drink, Jan enjoys a glass of his own Château les Merles *rouge* every single day.



Above: Though the château’s decor is modern chic, original elements that were still in good condition, such as wooden doors, were retained in order to preserve the property’s historic charm

Bottom left: Freshly picked produce for the restaurant

FOLLOW YOUR HEART

Besides learning the language and being willing to integrate, if there is one piece of advice that Jan would like to give anyone thinking about starting a business and new life in France, it is to realise what they are getting into: “It’s important to follow your heart, but also to be well aware of what steps are necessary to achieve your goals.”

Judging from the exciting plans Jan still has up his sleeve, the best is definitely yet to come. He has recently obtained

permission to build 23 more villas on the estate within the next few years and is also pondering what to do with the three-hectare patch of forest in the middle of the golf course. “Jan always has new plans,” says José with a smile. The management of the hotel, however, will soon fall into the hands of his daughter Judith, who also lives on-site with her family. “I have created the ultimate retirement home for us,” he laughs. “I look forward to growing old here.” **LF**

lesmerles.com



Jan enjoys spending time outdoors in the gardens