

# Organic growth

When Caro and Sean Feely bought a vineyard in Dordogne they achieved a long-held ambition to make their own wine, and their commitment to organic farming has been one of the biggest rewards, as *Paola Westbeek* learns

On the edge of Saussignac, a small village and *appellation* in the Bergerac wine region of south-west France, a little over an hour east of Bordeaux, Caro and Sean Feely are not only making wines, they're making a difference. From the very beginning of their French vineyard adventure, the Feelys rejected chemical farming and had their minds set on eco-friendly winemaking. A choice that did not come without a fair amount of challenges, but one that has proven to be incredibly rewarding.

## A VINEYARD DREAM

The story of organic and biodynamic vintners Caro and Sean Feely is one of courage and determination. When they met in Johannesburg in 1993, they shared a passion for wine and had both grown up in rural environments. Sean's grandparents owned a vineyard near Cape Town and Caro's interest had been sparked while sharing a house with a Master of Wine. It didn't take long for the young couple to start pondering the idea of earning a living as wine producers, but they first had to get on with their careers and pay off their student loans.

When work took them to Cape Town, Caro and Sean saw it as a great opportunity to deepen their wine knowledge. Weekends were spent tasting wines and getting to know local winemakers. At one point they were very close to buying a vineyard, but fate had other things in



Caro and Sean with daughters Sophia and Ellie



The interior of the Wine Lodge gîte



Main image: The property was in desperate need of renovation when Caro and Sean bought it

Inset above: The Wine Cottage was the couple's first gîte

Right: Guests can enjoy the view across the vineyard

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**GOING GREEN**

Their commitment to organic farming didn't necessarily make things easier. When the Feelys first started in 2005, only 1% of the vineyards in France were organic. Finding technicians and farm suppliers to serve the organic market was a challenge and Caro and Sean were advised to start farming conventionally in order to learn the ropes. "We really had to stick to our guns," says Caro. "Why would we poison our vineyard and start farming the way we didn't plan to continue?"

It is interesting to note that today, 13% of the vineyards in the Bergerac region are certified organic, and in Caro's *commune appellation* of Saussignac it is more than 30%. Organic wines are produced without chemical fertilisers and systemic herbicides, insecticides and fungicides. "When we say 'systemic', it means that the chemicals actually go inside the plant and are in the fruit," Caro points out. "No matter how much you wash it, they're not going to come off." A real eye-opener, especially when you consider that grapes used in winemaking aren't washed to begin with.

The Feelys took their commitment to green a step further by working biodynamically as well. "Biodynamics is a philosophy about the life forces of the vineyard and about how we can make our vines healthier," Caro explains. Basically, it involves a holistic approach including using a cosmic calendar to plan work in the vineyard and winery.



The Feelys' home dates from the 18th century

The rules of biodynamic viticulture are stricter than those of organic farming and plant, mineral and animal-based preparations are employed to help the vines thrive and grow strong.

"Seeing the health of our soil return and seeing this property come back to life, in every way, is probably what makes us most excited," says Caro. "We know that we are doing good for our land, our community and our clients."

In 2008, shortly after Château Feely was certified organic, they were contacted by a company in California who wanted to buy their grape skins. A breakthrough moment which Caro describes in her second book, aptly titled, *Saving Our Skins*. "We were delighted to find any way to valorise our waste product," she explains.

**HARD WORK PAYS OFF**

Château Feely produces a variety of reds and whites, a sparkling and still rosé and the occasional dessert wine. And it isn't just the wines that are ecologically sound. The estate also boasts environmentally friendly guest accommodation with exceptional views over the vineyards: the recently renovated Wine Cottage, a two-person gîte opened in 2007, and the Wine Lodge which accommodates four and

store for them. An attractive job offer in Dublin saw them returning to their Irish roots, but also meant having to put their dreams on hold.

Nevertheless, their destiny was in France. That very first year, they visited the Loire Valley on a wine holiday, fell madly for the charms of the country and knew they would not be returning to South Africa.

While advancing their corporate careers and living as city professionals in Dublin, Caro came across a magazine article that prompted her to put pen to paper and make a plan for her life in five years' time. Encouraging her husband to do the same, they exchanged papers and realised their goals were almost identical. "We wanted to be on a vineyard in France with no kids and a couple of dogs," recounts Caro, "and almost five years to the day we were in France with a vineyard, no dogs and two kids," she laughs.

**BUMPY START**

Finding a property that was within their budget and met their long list of criteria, however, was no easy task. In 2005, Caro finally spotted a

property in a newsletter that ticked all the boxes, but their second daughter Ellie had just been born and the process of buying came with all sorts of complications. "Sean had to come

over and see the place on his own because I couldn't travel with a newborn," explains Caro.

Against all odds, they managed to buy the property, an 18th-century farmhouse in desperate need of renovation but with beautiful views and the vineyards they had been dreaming of. "Within three months we were here, sold everything in Dublin and started a completely new life with two very young children," says Caro.

In *Grape Expectations*, the first book of a three-part series chronicling their life in France, Caro candidly recalls those first three years in the 'valley of despair'. Financial difficulties, daunting house renovations and two accidents (Sean cut his arm with a fitting on a tractor and during the harvest he lost a third of his finger) left them filled with uncertainty, wondering how they were ever going to make things work.

*"For me, the most fulfilling part is knowing that we're making a difference"*

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opened in 2010. The Wine Lodge was a huge project for the Feelys but one that definitely paid off. “It was the catalyst for not having to sit on the edge of the cliff every month wondering how we were going to make it,” Caro explains.

The educational activities offered at the estate – everything from one or two-hour visits to multi-day walking tours – proved to be another much-needed source of income and also gave Caro a chance to interact with others while sharing her knowledge and passion for wine, ecology and organic farming. Not only do people leave with a deeper knowledge of wine, but they also realise the importance of making ecological choices.

Today, life as winemakers in rural France is good for Caro, Sean and their teenage daughters Sophia and Ellie. The region of Nouvelle-Aquitaine has plenty to offer, from the Atlantic to the mountains of the Pyrénées and beautiful cities such as Bordeaux. Saussignac is small, there is a great sense of community and the locals are very friendly. Two of their best friends, Thierry and Isabelle, are French.

“Thierry is a seventh-generation winemaker. They have lots of friends so you would expect them not to make an effort to get to know new people, but they were so welcoming,” says Caro.

She also has great admiration for the country’s food culture: “There’s an appreciation and understanding of food and wine right through society. People eat well, take time for their meals and enjoy the conversation around it. They don’t just grab a sandwich and race off.” Caro recalls one occasion when she was in



Caro's experiences have provided the inspiration for several books

## WINEMAKING ASPIRATIONS?

- Though the idea of owning a vineyard in France may sound idyllic, it’s not for the faint-hearted. There are some serious risks involved in winemaking (machinery accidents, for example), and it requires a lot of time and hard work.
- Do your research and be prepared for financial surprises. Anticipate that you will probably need a third more funds than your estimate, and take off a third of your expected revenue.
- Learn French as much as you can, even before arriving in the country. Caro took night classes at the Alliance Française while still in Dublin.
- Keep in mind that the first three years (of any business) are incredibly difficult, but keep pushing through. Breakthroughs often come when you’re about to give up.

the kitchen preparing a meal and her daughter Sophia, who was not more than five years old at the time, pointed out to her that radish greens were perfectly edible.

“I was about to put them in the compost when she told me I could make a salad out of them and proceeded to tell me how to make the vinaigrette,” she laughs.

The Feelys’ hard work and dedication has not gone unnoticed, earning them two gold ‘Best of Wine Tourism’ awards: the first was awarded in 2013 for their visits and sustainable tourism, and the second in 2017 for their accommodation. In Caro’s third book, *Glass Half Full*, which was published in 2017, she compellingly writes about how she juggles a thriving business with family life and the emotional roller coaster that comes with menopause. She also continues to spread the message about the importance of choosing organic methods.

“For me, the most fulfilling part is knowing that we’re making a difference which we think is so crucial for our world, not just our little farm,” says Caro. **LF**

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