

# *Everything's commg up rosé*

From novice winemakers to pioneers of a world-renowned wine brand, Maison Mirabeau, Jeany and Stephen Cronk have found a new home and life in Provence, as **Paola Westbeek** discovers

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There are great reds and whites to be had in Provence, but rosé wine (which ranges in colour from pale pink to deep salmon) accounts for 90% of the region's production.

Rosé has become hugely popular in recent years, and Provence's blushing blends are capturing the hearts of many wine lovers who agree that it isn't only a drink for the warmer months. Jeany and Stephen Cronk also fell under the spell of rosé years before they actually decided to dedicate their lives to making it. In 2009, the couple left the suburbs of south-west London with their three young children and settled in the pretty village of Cotignac, about an hour east of Aix-en-Provence. A year later, their goal of creating a top-notch rosé came to fruition with Mirabeau Classic, the first cuvée of Maison Mirabeau's line of elegantly crafted wines. It was only the beginning.

### OUTSIDE THE BOX

Stephen was in his 20s when he developed an interest in wine during a trip to Australia and a visit to the Barossa Valley. After finishing university, he worked for a wine company in London and later started his own wine import business.



Unfortunately, luck wasn't on his side, so he sold up and embarked on a career in telecommunications, never really letting go of his desire to make a living from his passion.

When Stephen was offered a major promotion in 2008, he turned it down, realising the time was ripe to put plans into action. For years, he and Jeany had been talking about moving to France, and making rosé in Provence seemed like the most logical thing to do. The family sold their home and headed south in pursuit of a new and more fulfilling life.

"There are endless pictures of us toasting special moments with a bottle of Provence rosé," says Jeany, who spent her childhood summers at her

parents' house on the Côte d'Azur. "Both of us loved the region and its rosé wines, and couldn't quite understand why they weren't being drunk all the time. They weren't nearly as popular as they are now."

Although Stephen had his heart set on making fantastic rosé, limited funds and a lack of winemaking experience meant he had to think outside the box. Instead of making the wine himself, he became a *négociant* (wine merchant), working with some of the region's best winemakers and enlisting the help of experts such as renowned British Master of Wine Angela Muir, who assisted Maison Mirabeau in its early days. Using this approach allowed the Cronks to focus on

developing the Mirabeau label. "We knew what kind of wine people wanted to drink and had the sales and marketing skills necessary to build the brand," Jeany explains.

The accessibility of the wines was also key. "Provence rosé has the great advantage that it isn't a wine that's shrouded in mystery like the old Burgundies, for example. You can talk about it in a more approachable way."

Knowing their strengths and a solid determination to create an exceptional product certainly paid off. Soon after they launched Mirabeau Classic into the world, they secured a deal with Waitrose. Today, Maison Mirabeau's award-winning rosés are served in more than 50 countries across the globe, but that hasn't stopped the Cronks from continuing to expand the iconic brand and even realise their dream of owning a wine *domaine*.

### FARMING RESPONSIBLY

In 2019, 10 years and many wine accolades later, Stephen and Jeany found the perfect estate 40 minutes south-east of Cotignac in La Garde-Freinet. "We had looked at about 40 *domaines* in recent years, but could never find the one that

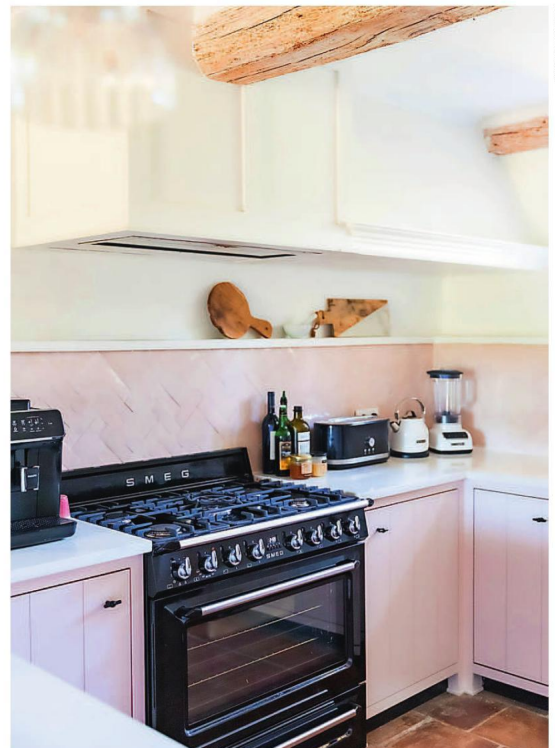
LEFT: Dinner alfresco

ABOVE: Mirabeau Classic was the first cuvée

RIGHT: Domaine Mirabeau

RIGHT, BOTTOM: The living room in La Bastide has been decorated with soft pink accents

FAR RIGHT: The kitchen at La Bastide



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*“It’s such a lovely spot – you’re completely on your own and yet just half an hour away from St-Tropez”*

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we were happy to commit to,” Jeany notes. “Just as we decided that perhaps this wasn’t meant to be, we saw this *domaine*. The minute we drove through the gates, we knew this was it.”

Encompassing 20 hectares (15 are currently planted with grenache, cinsault and vermentino grapes), Domaine Mirabeau is part of the new AOC sub-region Côtes de Provence Notre-Dame des Anges, which stretches out over 3,900 hectares and 10 *communes*. The area benefits from a Mediterranean climate and has a remarkable *terroir* composed of mineral-rich soils. Currently, 28% of the vineyards are certified organic or in the process of converting to organic farming, and Domaine Mirabeau has also committed to an ecologically sound future.

Rather than conventional viticulture, Domaine Mirabeau uses regenerative farming principles to bring back balance to the ecosystem and improve the health of the land. “Instead of ploughing between the vines and waging a war against weeds, we actually plant between them,” Jeany explains. “In winter we grow tall cover crops, and in spring we bring in a flock of sheep to graze them down and fertilise the soil naturally.”

Not ploughing the soil encourages biodiversity,

which helps it retain water and replenishes it with nutrients. There is no need to use chemical fertilisers, and because carbon dioxide is sequestered into the soils through photosynthesis, regenerative agriculture has a positive impact on global climate change. In fact, it goes a step beyond organic agriculture, where ploughing is often used. “Every time you turn the soil over, carbon dioxide is leaked into the atmosphere,” Jeany points out.

Last August, wildfires raged across the region wiping out 7,000 hectares of land. While in comparison to some of the surrounding vineyards the damage to Domaine Mirabeau was fortunately minimal, the occurrence of such natural disasters make the urgency of respecting the environment all the more clear.

Together with international farming experts and scientists, Stephen founded the Regenerative Viticulture Foundation to research and provide information about this innovative way of farming, and 50% of the proceeds of the *domaine*’s first cuvée, La Réserve, are being donated to the foundation. “We feel that we play a role in educating people and want to pass on the knowledge that we have acquired through our extensive research,” says Jeany.



**TOP RIGHT:** The *domaine* encompasses 20 hectares of vines

**TOP LEFT:** Mediterranean living is at the heart of Maison Mirabeau’s ethos

**FAR LEFT:** The family are now happily settled in France

**LEFT, TOP:** The vineyards are planted with grenache, cinsault and vermentino grapes



**LEFT, BOTTOM:** Gin is the latest addition to the Mirabeau brand





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*Did you  
know?*

The Mistral wind helps  
avoid unwanted humidity  
in the Provençal  
vineyards

## CREATING BEAUTY

What the Cronks are also passing on is the allure of Mediterranean living. Scrolling through Maison Mirabeau's carefully curated Instagram account, you can't help but long for a Provençal escape with sunny skies, vibrant dishes of local cuisine and glasses of pale pink rosé.

Luckily, experiencing the region's *art de vivre* is easy at Domaine Mirabeau's two handsome villas with vineyard views, lush gardens, terraces and a pool. The smaller accommodation, Le Mas, is a traditional stone farmhouse with five bedrooms, and La Bastide is the larger, seven-bedroom *maison de maître*. It boasts authentic beamed ceilings, a spacious kitchen, natural materials and charming pink accents (such as the clawfoot bathtub).

Jeany, who has a special interest in creating beautiful interiors, headed the renovations and did all the styling. "People really feel at home here," she explains.

"It's such a lovely spot. You're completely on your own and yet just a half an hour away from St-Tropez."

Over the course of two years, Jeany also transformed a historic building on Cotignac's town square into Maison Mirabeau's inviting boutique where you can enjoy wine tastings or shop for beautiful items to give your home a dash of southern French flair.

"I have a passion for all kinds of design," explains Jeany, whose creativity is superbly reflected in the attractive bottle of Maison Mirabeau's dry rosé gin. Added to the collection of rosés in 2020, the aromatic gin is based on neutral grape alcohol and a blend of local botanicals such as thyme, lavender, lemon peel, rose petals and angelica root.

The result is an elegant and mellow gin with a perfect balance of flavours evocative of the sun-drenched region. Both the gin and its gorgeous bottle inspired by the perfume industry have been lauded numerous times. For Jeany, it

has been one of the highlights of her work: "I was very happy and amazed that our gin was a success story and that the packaging won so many awards. I was up against some of the biggest design and spirit houses in the world."

## A BELOVED BRAND

Despite their successes, Stephen and Jeany are still full of ideas for what has grown to be one of the world's most beloved French rosé brands. Not only does Maison Mirabeau's range include eight still wines and a sparkling rosé, but their wine is also available in a handy bag-in-box format and slim cans that are just the thing for summer picnics and lazy days at the beach. Last year, their dry rosé gin was made available in a 200ml bottle and in ready-to-drink G&T canettes.

Of course, their journey didn't come without its fair share of challenges, which included everything from having to deal with the notoriously dreaded French

bureaucracy to navigating a path through all the rules and regulations surrounding alcohol. Moreover, moving to a new country was especially difficult for their children Felix and Josie, who at the time were seven and eight respectively.

"George was only 14 months old, but dealing with a different school system and not knowing the language were much harder than I had anticipated for my two older children," says Jeany. "It was a steep slope, but they slowly started making friends and speaking French. Getting our dog Oscar was a huge help. He was an amazing companion for them when they were feeling low."

Looking back at what they've achieved since they took the leap to move to Provence, Jeany sometimes still has to pinch herself: "I'm always super excited when I see someone drinking our wine, whether it's through a post on Instagram or if they're ordering it at a restaurant. It's a highlight every single time." ■

[maisonmirabeau.com](https://maisonmirabeau.com)