

In pursuit of the wine life, **Paola Westbeek** explores four of France's most revered wine regions to find out what they have to offer

TOUR *du* VIN



EPN

The vineyards of Burgundy

With 17 viticultural regions and approximately 400 distinct *appellations*, France offers winelovers plenty to choose from. From the noble pinot noirs of Burgundy to the crisp rosés of Provence, there are wines for every taste and budget. But what if you dream of living amidst vine-covered hills or venturing into the wine business?

For some, an attractive house in the countryside with a small plot of vines will suffice. Such hobby vineyards are ideal for those who want to learn something new and don't intend to earn a living in wine. It's a completely different story, however, if you have a career change in mind and aspirations of becoming a *vigneron*. Buying a commercial vineyard will involve more than just learning how to make wine.

"If you want a wine business, then you need to understand how to market and sell your wine to make a profit as you will certainly struggle financially if you don't," says Tim Swannie, director of HomeHunts, an agency that specialises in luxury properties and vineyards. Choosing the right location is also key.

BURGUNDY: MORE THAN CÔTE-D'OR

The Burgundy wine region spans 230km between Chablis and Grand Auxerrois in the north and Mâconnais in the south. The whites, accounting for most of the production, are made predominantly with the chardonnay grape and the reds are mostly pinot noir. The region produces a very modest amount of fruity rosés and is known for its sparkling *crémants*. Roughly 195 million bottles of Burgundy wines are sold across the globe every year, with the UK being the largest export market.

The viticultural area counts some 4,000 winegrowing businesses, and though many estates have remained in the hands of the same family throughout the centuries, Burgundy's vineyards also attract Brits, Canadians, Americans, Dutch, Japanese and Koreans.



Chalon-sur-Saône is at the heart of the Côte Chalonnaise

Dutch couple Roelof Ligtmans and Marlon Steine purchased Domaine de la Monette (domainedelamonette.fr) in 2007 and made their first vintage in 2009. Today, they own 11 hectares and have an annual production of approximately 50,000 bottles. Their wines are mostly organic and sold as far as the United States and Japan.

The Domaine is in Mercurey, one of the most important *appellations* of the Côte Chalonnaise, a sub-region of Burgundy situated to the south of the Côte-d'Or, often referred to as the 'golden slope'. Driving along the 100km Route des Grands Vins, you'll come across charming viticultural villages such as Bouzeron in the north (famous for its golden aligoté wines), Rully (the cradle of crémant and known for its 12th-century château perched on a hill overlooking the vineyards) and Buxy (home to a *cave des vigneron*s where you can sample and buy a selection of the region's modestly priced wines).

Chalon-sur-Saône, the town that gave the Côte Chalonnaise wine region its name, is also worth a visit; on Place St-Vincent, you can stop for a glass of local wine at one of the many bars and restaurants encircling the handsome Cathédrale St-Vincent.

In the Mâconnais region, a little farther south, a 1.14ha plot of vineyards (1.14 hectares) recently sold for €75,000. In the hamlet of Pruzilly, close to the border with the Beaujolais region, a winemaking property with a 13th-century château, outbuildings and six hectares of vineyards producing about 300 hectolitres annually was recently on the market for €1.65m. According to Vineatransaction (vineatransaction.com), there isn't much for sale in the prestigious Côte-d'Or region and prices can be exorbitantly high.

BORDEAUX: DISTINGUISHED WINES

Bordeaux is the world's most prestigious wine-producing region and a mecca for connoisseurs eager to taste their way through the respected *appellations* located

on both banks of the Gironde estuary. The vineyards cover more than 120,000 hectares and there are 60 *appellations*, with a wide diversity of soils and microclimates. Although reds account for more than 90% of the production, there are excellent dry and sweet whites, rosés and even sparkling wines. Reds are mostly made from merlot, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc grapes. For white wines, the main varieties are sauvignon blanc, sémillon and muscadelle.

Bordeaux is one of the most expensive areas, and larger vineyards are usually not openly marketed. According to HomeHunts, agents advertise only about 10% as sellers tend to be discreet. "The buyers of this type of property work with a buyer's agent or vineyard specialist because they know that the best properties are not on the open market," says Tim Swannie. "For commercial vineyard purchases, we usually introduce an independent wine property expert to assist our buyers throughout the purchase."

A hobby vineyard in St-Émilion (€1.368m, HomeHunts) features more than an acre of organic vines, 4,800m² of land, an elegant manor house and winemaker's house with a total of seven bedrooms, while an award-winning vineyard near Bordeaux with seven hectares, significant income potential, over 84.4 hectares of land and two houses is €1.295m.

Bordeaux, the vibrant capital of Nouvelle-Aquitaine is listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site. Just 10 minutes from the city's international airport, it boasts wide boulevards lined with neoclassical architecture, interesting museums and art galleries, a bustling nightlife, over 350 historic monuments, fine restaurants and Europe's longest shopping street (Rue Ste-Catherine). As a centre of distinguished wines, it offers visitors plenty of opportunities to learn about the viticultural region and sample the famous vintages, whether at the many wine bars or during a lesson at the city's wine school.



Rosé wine from Château Léoube



Château Léoube

PROVENCE: LA VIE EN ROSÉ

Stretching from the Rhône Valley to the shores of the Mediterranean and the Italian border, Provence is a land of abundance that has inspired and attracted epicures and bon vivants from all over the world. Its cuisine is full of colour and flavour with classics such as ratatouille, *soupe au pistou* and *salade niçoise*. And what goes better with these sun-drenched dishes than a glass of chilled rosé?

The vineyards of Provence cover 26,680 hectares and are spread out over the departments of Bouches-du-Rhône, Var and Alpes-Maritimes. Provence is the largest rosé producer in France,

with more than 90% of the capacity devoted to the blushing wines. During the last three decades, production of rosé has tripled and the wine has become more popular than ever. "Provence is quite expensive because



St-Émilion is at the heart of the Bordeaux vineyards

Did you know?

France accounts for 16% of the world's total wine production



Harvesting grenache grapes at Château Léoube, run by British couple Anthony and Carole Bamford

“Provence is a land of abundance that has inspired bon vivants from all over the world”

the Provence rosés market is very strong,” reports Vinea Transaction. “There are no *domaines* available for less than €5m.”

It wasn’t the prospect of booming business that brought Lord Anthony Bamford (chairman of JCB) and his wife Lady Carole (an organic food businesswoman) to Bormes-les-Mimosas in 1997, however. In fact, they went into wine completely by accident.

“We had been looking for a house in Provence for about a decade,” explains Carole. “Our estate agent recommended viewing this property but warned us that it needed restoring. We fell in love instantly. It was our sleeping beauty.”

With no experience in winemaking, they enlisted the help of celebrated vigneron Jean-Jacques Ott, owner of the neighbouring estate, and immediately began converting the 70 hectares of vineyards to organic farming. “Having turned our family farm over to organic principles in the UK, we wanted to bring the same sustainable, natural approach to Château Léoube (leoube.com), working with the rhythm of the seasons to preserve and protect the land and to produce wines in harmony with nature’s cycles,” they say. Today, Château Léoube’s award-winning rosés are sold in more than 40 countries. ▶

5 REASONS TO LIVE IN A WINE AREA

- 1:** Access to great wines – from premier crus to affordable tipples, you’ll be able to choose from the best vintages of your local area
.....
- 2:** Beautiful scenery – who wouldn’t want to gaze out of their window onto hillsides covered in verdant vineyards?
.....
- 3:** Pretty villages – wine areas tend to be fairly wealthy and this is reflected in the local architecture, from picturesque villages to smart towns and grand châteaux
.....
- 4:** A new career – if you’ve always dreamed of running your own vineyard, be inspired by the tales on these pages of those who’ve done just that
.....
- 5:** Great gastronomy – fine wines tend to go hand in hand with fabulous local food, whether the rich poultry dishes of the south-west or the fragrant seafood of the coastal areas



*Don't
miss!*

The Cité du Vin in Bordeaux, so much more than a wine museum!

LANGUEDOC: AFFORDABLE VINEYARDS

Englishman Jonathan Hesford and his New Zealand wife Rachel Treloar were working only a block away from the World Trade Center when they witnessed a plane fly into the North Tower. In the aftermath, they had to move out of their apartment, and Jonathan lost his job. “We returned to England having gone through all that, and it made us stand back and reflect on what was important in our lives and what we should do next,” he said.

The couple later moved to New Zealand where Jonathan studied oenology and viticulture at university. While there, he read about how excellent wines were being made by a new generation of winemakers in Languedoc-Roussillon.

Extending over more than 300,000 hectares, Languedoc-Roussillon is the world's largest wine-producing region. It wasn't until the 1980s, however, that quality became more important than quantity and the reputation of the wines started to improve. The region once known for its simple *vin de table* took an interest in new winemaking technology, improved the condition of its soils and started experimenting with new blends. Roughly 90% of the production is red wine made from varietals such as carignan, cinsault, grenache, syrah, merlot and mourvèdre grapes.

In 2005, Jonathan packed his bags again and decided to spend a month acquainting himself with the area's landscape and winemaking possibilities. “The price of vineyards here is low compared to other wine regions, both in France and the New



Run by an Anglo-New Zealand couple, Domaine Treloar is critically praised in the Languedoc region

World. The winemaking rules are relaxed, and it is a beautiful place to live, within reach of the sea and the mountains,” he points out.

In 2006, the couple purchased an old winery with 10 hectares of vines on the edge of Trouillas, a village in the foothills of the Pyrénées. Though the winery was in good shape, they had to build their house from scratch, later adding a three-bedroom gîte and studio apartment which they use for harvest interns and guests.

“Making the first vintage was a challenge,” Jonathan explains. “Although I had made wine at other wineries, I never managed the whole process myself, which was much more difficult in a foreign language and obeying all the rules and regulations.” Their hard work paid off. Domaine Treloar (domainetreloar.com)

makes about 35,000 bottles of sustainable wine annually. It is among the most critically praised in the region, even regarded by wine critic Jancis Robinson as the best in Roussillon.

When asked what advice he would give to anyone thinking of starting a wine business in France, Jonathan says: “Do your homework, get some experience, don't buy more land than you need, know where you are going to sell your wine and be prepared for years of hard work without any time for holidays. But if you can make it work, it's a great lifestyle and very rewarding.” ■

TURN OVER ▶

For our wine area property picks, essential factfile and a local's view

A local's view

A combination of family and vineyards led **John** and **Mary Bruton Sandifer** to a new life as winemakers in Gironde



What were you doing before you took over Domaine de la Tourbeille in 2011?

John was a consultant in the IT industry and I am a writer. We were living in New York and John's job brought us to Europe when our three children were small. His mother was French and his family had a Bordeaux estate, La Tourbeille, where he spent his childhood summers.

What is the history of Domaine de la Tourbeille?

Legend has it the château served as a hunting lodge for Henri IV in the 16th century. It became an elegant house with stones quarried from the Dordogne river and an agricultural compound. Barrels were rolled out from the original winery down to boats on the river destined for Bordeaux and England. The property was acquired after WWI by John's great uncle, an injured hero who later ceded it to John's mother. The American connection comes from John's father, an architect. His guiding principle for renovations in 1968 was that it must still "bathe in its historic juices".

Why did you decide to go into the wine business?

We helped John's parents manage the property for years while living in Paris. The locals told us our *terroir* was "exceptional" and we always dreamed of finding out just how good the wine could be.

But we also knew taking over the vineyard would be a huge venture. When our last child went off to school, the time was right. We put our hearts into discovering the character of our *terroir* and making wine that reflected its unique taste profile.

Did you have any experience in winemaking?

No. We read books avidly and hired an excellent oenologue



John and Mary enjoying a relaxing moment out from their busy lives



The latest generation of winemakers



The domaine was inherited from John's parents



Domaine de Tourbeille is a 25-acre vineyard above the River Dordogne



There are amazing views from the property

who held our hands through every step. When our first vintage was ready, she called it "the most coddled wine in all of Gironde"! Through the years we've made mistakes, but our lack of experience also made us conscientious. It was probably carefulness and passion that saved us from our ignorance.

On your blog you write that you risked your savings to revive a vineyard - what are some of the challenges you've faced?

After we began making wine, John's mother passed away and the family decided to sell the château. We bought their

shares to keep the remaining 100 acres of agricultural land. Our move to the farm meant constructing a new winery, investing in new equipment, dealing with restrictions caused by our farmer's lease, a complete gutting and renovation of the farmhouse, a lost vintage in 2013 and continuous climate worries.

Perhaps our greatest challenge was sales. Just as we began, the traditional Bordeaux sales channels (the *négoçant* model) contracted. Shut out of these avenues, we had to invent our own. We developed a friends-and-family network

in France, the UK and the US, sold the wine at our Taverne Belvedere and through a local alliance of winemakers. In time, the wine was discovered by importers.

What changes have you made to the property?

The agricultural property had fertile land and amazing views but needed renovation. We transformed an old stone barn to create a winery next to the vineyard and bought custom-fit stainless steel tanks and other equipment. Of the two 17th-century farmhouses, we gutted one completely.

Tell us more about the vineyards and your wines?

The 25-acre vineyard is perched on a cliff dotted with prehistoric caves, high above the River Dordogne. Like St-Émilion, Juillac has been planted with vines since Roman times. The roots reach down into the flint-limestone bedrock, which adds a touch of minerality. The hilltop offers 360-degree sunshine while the limestone-clay soil provides nourishment and some protection against drought.

The appellation is Bordeaux Supérieur. Varietals are merlot, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon. The wines have won



prestigious awards, including the Concours de Paris, Bettane & Desseauve, Guide Hachette and Revue du Vin de France. Until the 1950s, the property was a self-sustaining polyculture farm with diverse crops, animals and orchards. We're planning a modified return to this model by cultivating a diversity of crops, both to anticipate climate change and align with our biodiversity ethics.

You've lived in cities such as Paris and London; how is life in the countryside different?
We're more involved in our local community. I am a

member of the musical Festival de Gensac and John is on the village council. We live by the seasons: spring brings intense work in the vineyard and maintenance of orchards and fields. In summer, we're busy with tours and tastings, hand-labour in the vineyard and work at the *taverne*. September through December is harvest and vinification. During winter, we focus on pruning the vineyard, bottling and sales. Happily, the quieter rhythm allows me some time for my writing. The best change has been working as a family. After years of living far apart, it's a luxury to be so close.

Do you speak French?

John learned from his mother in childhood. I studied French in university, then took night classes here. The best teacher was John's mother's cook. I spent hours listening, talking and learning her recipes!

What advice would you give to anyone considering going into the wine business?

Take classes in winemaking and vineyard management. Enlist the help of an oenologue who understands the market, your goals and budget. Hire an accountant who can inform you about legal structures for setting up a business

and about labour laws, tax implication and social charges. A realistic financial and sales plan is key.

What do you enjoy most about your life as winemakers?

It has been exciting to learn new skills; from training in taste and smell and exploring how to improve the soil, to the complexities of running an agricultural business. For us, winemaking is about the stewardship of land. We create something that provides pleasure and still try to give back to the earth. ■

latourbeille.com