

From city to *santé*

A move from central London to a vineyard in Languedoc-Roussillon has paid dividends in more ways than one, and cheers to that, says **Vicky Leigh**



Forgive me for straying into cliché territory, but it really is hard to think of France without the image of a wine-filled glass springing to mind (or rather hand). I think few people would disagree that France and *le vin* are a match made in heaven. They make an attractive couple, and their relationship has been a long and, quite literally, fruitful one.

Speaking of attractive couples, Hollywood superstars Brad and Angelina were seduced by the idea of putting down French roots and making their own wine. They snapped up Château Miraval, a 150-acre vineyard in Provence, in 2009 and the first 6,000 bottles of their 2012 rosé sold out in a matter of hours. What might have initially been dismissed by critics as a passing celebrity fad has actually garnered rave reviews and awards alike.

Now there's no denying that 'Brangelina' and their millions live in a very different world, and yet the world of winemaking is not reserved for the likes of A-listers alone. Many a British expat has fallen under the same spell, and it's hardly surprising in a country with so many famous vineyards, not to mention opportunities to buy properties with winemaking potential.

Which brings us to James and Catherine Kinglake, who swapped city life in London for a vineyard in Languedoc-Roussillon in 2004. With views of both the Pyrénées and Corbières mountains, Domaine Begude has been producing wine since the 16th century and has been organically farmed for the last 30 years.

The couple began their property search in 2003, and by the time they completed on the sale the following year there had been a new addition to the family. The couple's daughter

was born in August 2004 and they moved to France when she was just a month old.

"We'd been trying for some time to start a family but had been unsuccessful, and rather than carrying on slaving away at work in London we thought we'd go and do what we really wanted to do before we got too old," explains James. "However, just two weeks after we found Domaine Begude, Catherine was pregnant. We've been very lucky; I don't know if it was just fortuitous or there was a lack of stress, but it all worked out."

After contacting a company specialising in the sale of vineyard properties, the Kinglakes visited around 30 different options during their search, some of which were in Provence, but the one they eventually bought was the second one they saw. James and Catherine found they were comparing everything to Domaine Begude but nothing else quite measured up.

However, as the property was already under offer it looked like it wasn't meant to be, but when the sale then fell through they were able to step in and secure it. It turned out that they were already familiar with the vineyard's wine too, as it was sold in Oddbins in the UK at the time they were househunting.

"We spoke to a few people who were quite discerning in the wine trade and discovered that the wine had a good reputation," says James. "We were told that the place made great wine and that we had a great chance, so we went for it."

Laying the foundations

James had done a very basic wine course at Plumpton college in the UK, which offers viticulture education, but other than that



neither he nor Catherine had any previous experience to prepare them for the adventure that lay ahead. As a result they knew from the beginning that the most important thing they needed to do was to find a good manager and winemaker. Cue Laurent Girault, a Frenchman who had worked in a vineyard in New Zealand as well as in several different appellations across France.

As the house at Domaine Begude had been uninhabited for many years it required major renovation work, yet the first thing James and Catherine did before carrying out any work on their own home was to build a house from scratch for Laurent and his family to live in on the estate. In the meantime, they gave what was formerly a stable a very quick and basic makeover in order to create some living accommodation for themselves and their daughter. It would be another three years before renovation work on their family home was complete and they were able to move in.

"It was a very long project and it was very hard work for the first three or four years," says James. "We'd just taken on too many stressful things at once. We'd had a baby and we'd moved from the UK to the middle of nowhere in a different country. We were also learning about the wine business and trying to sell it at the same time."

I'm exhausted just thinking about this rather overwhelming list, but focusing first and foremost on the wine has certainly paid off. Domaine Begude is now an award-winning vineyard, and also has organic certification. It had effectively been organically farmed before they bought it but without being officially certified, and as James and his team continued that practice

Facing page from top: *The house has been transformed both inside and out; James and Catherine among the vines; the vineyard is surrounded by open countryside and is a world away from London*

This page clockwise from top left: *James's team hard at work; the house at Domaine Begude had been uninhabited for many years and this is how it looked when James and Catherine first moved there; the vineyard enjoys views of both the Pyrénées and Corbières mountains*

they decided to obtain certification a few years ago. The reality of making wine organically means that the vineyard produces about 40% of the yield it would if non-organic methods were used. The rules and regulations are also much more stringent, for example concerning the fertilisers used on the vines and the sulphur levels in the wine. And yet they are all committed to being organic and are very keen to continue.

"This is important to us not just in terms of doing the right thing for the planet, but as with any living organism, you find that the less you mess with it, the healthier it gets," explains James. "For example, studies on human beings have shown that the more antibiotics you take the less robust you become, and it's the same with vines – the less you mess with them the better they are. We're not blitzing them with chemicals and we've found that the quality of the fruit coming off the vine is improving. Consumers typically find they are less negatively affected by organic wine too."

James and his team have concentrated on producing wine to suit what they hope is an 'international taste'. Their modern take on French wine is clean and fruit-driven, and

Things to consider when buying a vineyard

Operating licence

French law requires that a vineyard holds an operating licence prior to engaging in agricultural activities, and the licence must be obtained before completion of a transaction. An application usually takes up to four months.

SAFER notification

SAFER (Société d'Aménagement Foncier d'Etablissement Rural) has pre-emption rights over agricultural land in France, including vineyards. It must be notified of a relevant sale by the *notaire* in order to decide whether to exercise its right to buy.

On the market

This eight-bedroom property in Gers, Midi-Pyrénées comes with six hectares of armagnac and wine-producing vineyards. Situated just 20 minutes from Auch, the house was destroyed during the French Revolution and then rebuilt, and has been gradually restored over the last 20 years. The asking price of €980,000 also includes a swimming pool. (www.my-french-house.com)





Above: Labeled bottles of Domaine Begude's wine, which is sold in the UK as well as in Australia and California; James surrounded by the impressive machinery that is used to produce the vineyard's wine
Below: The vineyard has been producing wine since the 16th century and now has organic certification

approximately 50% of the vineyard's production is sold in the UK now. Domaine Begude also supplies Raymond Blanc's Brasserie Blanc chain with a Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir. Chardonnay is also sold to Australia and California, and while James currently does not sell much in France this is starting to increase.

I wonder whether James has experienced any difficulties as a result of, for want of better words, playing the French at their own game?

"I think that if you don't do anything too revolutionary, local people are pleased to see someone employing local people," he reflects. "We're quite lucky to have won a few awards for the wine, which reflects well on the local area. There are also people who can show you the way, and I've always been a firm believer in finding someone who knows what they're doing if you don't."

Home from home

When it came to tackling the sizeable renovation project that was to become their family home, the Kinglakes worked closely with a local architect and builder. As the property had not been lived in for so long it needed almost everything doing to it, both inside and out. The large roof needed replacing, the exterior was re-rendered, internal walls were knocked down, new chimneys and chimney breasts were installed and every window was bespoke. Catherine then put her keen eye for interior design to good use in the house, and also rose to the challenge of overhauling the garden.

"Looking back now it was horrendous!" laughs James. "However, the French have a very good system – we put the tender out to a

number of tradesmen and then made our choice on the basis of both reputation and price. There were no cost overruns, apart from things we decided to add as the project progressed, and it took a little bit longer than we anticipated but otherwise there were no major problems."

It took a lot of time and effort, but the end result was a comfortable family home with plenty of space for Catherine's parents, who spend almost half of the year in France, as well as for friends who come to visit and professional buyers who come to the vineyard.

The whole family are reaping the rewards of life at Domaine Begude. Their daughter is completely bilingual, and James relishes the variety that living here affords them.

"Every day is different, and that's what is great about what I do," he says. "We can also be really creative in terms of what we plant and the style of wine we then decide to make. I think it's very important to create in life."

After so many years of hard work, there are no plans to leave France behind any time soon, and although James returns to the UK regularly to visit family he can't imagine moving back permanently.

"I love London and I like visiting, but I don't want to live there again," he says. "We make pretty good wine now and the set-up here is lovely. Summer is wonderful, and the weather is usually very good from May to September too, which is quite a big draw compared to somewhat grey days in the UK. We've done a lot of the hard work and now we're really starting to enjoy it, so I think we'll be here for the foreseeable future." ■

www.domainebegude.com

If you're not quite sure you're ready to take on your own vineyard, there are a number of alternative options that would still allow you to raise a toast to your own wine:

Hobby vineyard – a popular option for first-timers. Buyers purchase a property that comes with a 'hobby' vineyard of several hectares, which is run by a local winemaker and produces a 'wine income'. This means that you are paid in bottles of your own private label wine.

Vineyard view – if you'd like to look out over rows of vines without the responsibility of working them, then a property with a vineyard view could offer the best of both worlds. Built in 1760, this four-bedroom *maison de maître* in Charente-Maritime is surrounded on three sides by vineyards and every room enjoys views of the vines. The house has been renovated as is for sale for €325,000. (www.beauxvillages.com)



Leasing vines – a number of leaseback developments in France now offer this option, such as La Durantie in Tarn. The development of three to five-bedroom properties is centred around the château on the 15-hectare estate, and vines are now being reintroduced into the grounds. From 2015, owners will be able to lease or buy their own package of 50 vines on the 1.3 hectare vineyard, and customised labels will also be available for an extra personal touch. This three-bedroom villa at La Durantie is on the market for €491,920. (www.durantie.com)



On the grapevine

It's *vendange* (harvest) time in France, and there are plenty of opportunities to try your hand at grape-picking. Seasonal jobs are advertised on websites such as www.workaway.info and www.pole-emploi.fr, or why not visit a harvest festival to soak up the atmosphere and enjoy the festivities? The *Féria des Vendanges* in Nîmes celebrates the grape harvest with a three-day festival, and takes place from 19-21 September.