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Property in France: Homes with vintage

British buyers are flocking to French wine villages finds Zoe Dare Hall.



Weekends in wine country: Domaine de la Bastide Neuve

Chablis, Beaune and Nuits-Saint-Georges trip off the tongue so readily as familiar names on wine labels that it can be easy to forget that they are also living villages, not just quaffable vintages.

It was this appealing combination of the great renown of Burgundy wines, and the traditional, untouched charm of the villages that produce them, that inspired Su and David Bishop to move to the Côte de Beaune to convert derelict old buildings into stylish second homes.

They left behind their property development businesses in London and started with their own home, in the heart of the wine villages. "We used to stop off in Burgundy on our way to Southern France as it's about half way from Calais. Then nine years ago, we bought an old wine storage barn in Cisseey for £150,000 and turned it into a holiday home – and now our permanent home," says Su, 52.

They realised the potential for a business and set up their development company Arena Park. "Lots of people come to these Burgundy villages interested in wine, but it's hard to find property," says Su. "Vineyards are far more valuable than land turned into building plots, so these villages aren't expanding." The couple have another renovated village cottage for sale.

While they keep a hold of their vineyards, the French with properties to spare are selling off old buildings such as barns. This is how Su found an ideal opportunity in Pommade, home to many a premier cru. There, she and David turned a derelict 17th-century coaching inn into seven loft-style apartments. There are two left, priced from £257,000 for a three-bed duplex.



They also take on one-off renovation projects for clients and have renovated old properties for sale in famous wine villages such as Meursault, including a converted town house for £442,000, and Demigny, where there are four cottages in a stone barn, starting at £196,000.

“These villages, typically clustered on hillsides, are thriving and wealthy,” says Su. “Architecturally, they resemble Cotwolds villages. They are well looked after, there is huge civic pride and there are plenty of old ladies who like to watch over us to check we are doing things properly.”

Graham Jones, 51, vice president of furniture design company Knoll, and his wife Tracy, 43, a magazine distribution director, visit their three-bedroom duplex in Le Clos de Pommade, which they bought from Arena Park for £250,000, every few weeks.

“It’s perfectly comfortable for a weekend break ... We can catch the 1.30pm train from St Pancras and be in our favourite restaurant in Burgundy by 7.45pm. We step instantly into a more peaceful environment and clear our heads,” says Graham. “We wanted to be in Burgundy for the wine villages, which have kept their charm and integrity, and we wanted to wake up hearing birds and church bells,” he says. “A lot of the properties we’d seen over the years had small, dark rooms, but Le Clos stood out with its spacious, open-plan and bright interiors and the way the properties retain the natural materials.”

Further south in the Languedoc, in Quarante, a lively village on the Canal du Midi near Beziers, Karl O’Hanlon, director of development company Domaine & Demeure, is turning the neglected 19th-century chateau Domaine de la Bastide Neuve back into a wine-producing estate, with property owners benefiting from the fruits of his labour. The grand but faded old turreted chateau and its outbuildings – which include the old winery, blacksmith’s house, grape picker’s lodge and hay lofts – are being converted into 27 properties, ranging from one-bedroom apartments at £170,000 to a large four-bedroom house with a private pool for £572,000.

“The estate has been in the same family from the 1880s until recently, but they sold off their vineyard 20 years ago,” says O’Hanlon. “I’m going to buy vines, modernise the old winemaking facility and bring in several independent winemakers to produce wine that we can sell internationally,” he says. “The winemakers will pay their rent in wine and each property will get about 50 cases a year.”

Wine estates, along with churches, says O’Hanlon, lend themselves to the most attractive developments in the Languedoc. “I hear constantly that people want old properties with character near lively villages near the coast and an airport. They want properties that are fully managed but which give them the freedom to use them whenever they want and to rent them out, so that is what we are providing.

“This is a post-crisis project, with the whole deal put together since the banking crisis broke,” O’Hanlon adds of Domaine de la Bastide Neuve. “Prices are 30 per cent cheaper than similar boutique wine-based developments which were selling a few years ago.”

Let’s drink to that.

