

INTERNATIONAL



CHARMING
A chateau near Pau, main, €2.09m with Home Hunts; Cedric Howson's wine estate, left, €1.5m with Marbella Homes (marbellahomes.com); far right, a house at Château St Pierre de Serjac, €650,000 (domaine demeure.com)

Vintage years in your own winery

Owning a vineyard doesn't have to be a slog. Liz Rowlinson learns where to buy, and how to turn it into a lifestyle

Across the vine-covered hills and valleys of the northern hemisphere it's harvest time. The high point of the wine producer's season when the end result of a year's hard work is realised, it's an intense few days of all-hands-on-deck toil, usually followed by a celebratory supper. For hobby vineyard owner Cedric Howson, this year's crop was a great success, despite the unusually wet winter for Andalusia, in southern Spain. Early last month, his family and guests gathered at their country estate in the hills of the Sierra de las Nieves

'We could make a lot more wine if we worked harder, but it's always been a hobby rather than a business'

behind the Costa del Sol and, with a little help from their neighbours, toiled for a day and a half to gather and press the organically grown cabernet sauvignon, tempranillo, merlot and shiraz grapes from their six acres of vines. "The red was a fine crop, the sugar perfect," says Howson, a businessman who with his wife, Lee-Anne, divides his time between this rural *finca*, a home in nearby Marbella, and Wimbledon in south-west London. "We make around 2,000 bottles a year, to give to friends or sell locally, and gift the sweet white wine – to our staff. We could make a lot more if we worked at it more vigorously but, for me, it's always been a little hobby rather than a business. "Having a vineyard has been wonderful. With no frost in the winter, it's the perfect climate here. You can see all the way to the Mediterranean. I love sitting outside the *bodega*, having a wine-tasting session with friends, knowing exactly which vines the wine came from, and then not having a headache in the morning as it's all



organic. Guests are fascinated by our rather eccentric wine activities." Indeed, many wine enthusiasts will toy with the idea of owning a property like Howson's, but it's a dream that many won't realise because of the hard work or deep pockets required; if you are not hands-on, you need to pay someone else to be. Singers and actors seem particularly into the idea. Sir Cliff Richard, Mick Hucknall, Antonio Banderas, Sam Neill and Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have all owned vineyards. Buying one for the lifestyle benefits remains very popular, says Tim Swannie of Home Hunts,



a buying agent in France that has a specialist vineyard division. "From young couples looking for a retreat, to City boys, retired couples and families looking for a B&B property with revenue, we help a diverse range of people find lifestyle vineyard properties in France," he says. "We get a lot of interest from British clients, as well as Dutch, Belgians, Germans, Scandinavians and some Americans," he adds. "Most don't want to turn the vines into a commercial venture, but love the idea of being able to produce their own wine for friends and family." Looking after a hobby vineyard in France or Spain doesn't have to dominate your time. You could get a



STUNNING
A Chianti estate, right, €4.8m, and a vineyard in Mendoza, left, through Sphere Estates

local vineyard to manage and harvest the grapes or learn the ropes yourself. "Many buyers have no previous experience and will get help from a local expert for the first season or two, while they get up to speed," adds Swannie. Howson was self-taught and also identified local experts to call on their help. "The internet is a great source of information to learn about wine-making," he says. "There are some great websites that tell you which barrels or tanks to use. We use French oak barrels and spent around €150,000 (£133,139) setting it all up with the help of a German family nearby." His estate, which has 60 varieties of organic fruit and vegetables, is now for sale for €1.5million through Marbella Homes. It's all set up for a new owner who could tap into the growth market



INVESTED
Cedric Howson, wife Lee-Anne and nephew Edward Burke in the vineyard, below

of wine tourism. "Much more could be made of the property from agritourism," adds the 70-year-old, who wants to spend more time with his children who live in the Far East.

The house has four bedrooms and a swimming pool, but two *casitas* could be developed into accommodation, a workshop could be converted into riding stables and it's located an hour from Malaga airport and Ronda. Buying a property with a vineyard attached certainly takes extra thinking and research.

Although Spain has more acres of vines than any other nation in the world, it is a much more fertile hunting ground when looking for beautiful properties advertised for sale that are attached to small vineyards.

In the world famous Bordeaux region, a hobby vineyard with around five acres of vines (which produces around 15,000 bottles per year) costs between €500,000 and €1million, says Xavier Routurier, a vineyard specialist at agent Leggett. Although you could pay double that if it's within 20 minutes of the elegant city of Bordeaux.

"When buying a vineyard you need to make sure the vineyard is in good condition and that is respects all the strict regulations," he says. "You should ask: is the equipment working OK? Is the soil the right type and *terroir* good? The density of the vines is very important, as is their age; 20-year-old vines are at their peak."

If this all sounds a bit overwhelming, you can live on a vineyard and get free wine – without lifting a finger. Château Capitul in the Languedoc has private homes on its fully-operating wine estate, though owners have no active involvement in the wine production. It was such a winning formula that the 46 off-plan homes sold out within four months

last year (they are due to be complete in 2020). It was the third such project by developer Domaine & Demeure, following Les Carrasses (28 properties) and St Pierre de Serjac (36 homes), also thriving wine estates centred on turreted chateaux that operate as five-star hotels.

While the founder of the developer, Karl O'Hanlon, reports he is not planning another one, the good news for buyers is that there are several resale properties available at the first two projects. "It takes so much effort to get the planning for each project – Capitul took six years – which is probably why more people don't do this," he says.

"But it's popular because living on a winery has a charm, it brings with it a history. The region itself is fantastic, and having the services of a luxury hotel and no upkeep issues is appealing. The region has a superb climate, enjoys easy access and is not overdeveloped."

The pricing is also sensible. There are currently 10 properties available on the estate, from a one-bedroom flat for €225,000, to a three-bedroom house at €730,000. Owners get 55 per cent of the net revenue from rentals after VAT and rental commissions are deducted. "Meeting the wine maker and enjoying tastings at harvest time is probably as hands-on as most owners get," says O'Hanlon.

Prove the idea of owning a piece of vineyard rather than just a holiday home? In Mendoza, in the foothills of the Argentine Andes, you can own a piece of vineyard of between three and 10 acres from \$300,000 (£230,000). It might require rather a long flight to check on your vines, but the Uco Valley produces some of the top-ranked wines in the world, and the cost of land and management is significantly lower than in Europe, says Robert Green of agent Sphere Estates.

"This scheme offers a structure of hassle-free ownership with a full-time team of experts in place to plant and maintain the vines that doesn't appear to be available in Europe, where vineyard owners must arrange their own management," he says. "The climate in Mendoza is generally more reliable, so the results are more consistent. You can also build your own home within your vineyard, while having access to fantastic resort facilities."

The agent also has a large Tuscan wine estate for sale in one of the most famous old world wine areas of Chianti, which is currently an active holiday business, for €4.8million.



PROPERTY OF THE WEEK

All change at the Guard House standing sentinel near Winchester's cathedral



The land on which the Guard House in Winchester stands is packed with history, writes *Marianna Hunt*. It was the site of a royal castle built by William the Conqueror, and centuries later it was besieged by Oliver Cromwell during the English Civil War. The fountain, topiary hedging and immaculate lawns spreading out in front of the red brick facade that greet you as you approach the Peninsula Barracks development speak of the place's regal past. In 1683 Charles II asked Sir Christopher Wren to construct him a palace at Winchester modelled on the splendour of Versailles. Wren's grand designs were never seen in their full glory, as the building was destroyed by a fire during its construction.

Instead, the unfinished palace was used to house foreign prisoners. In the early 20th century the land was developed into Hampshire's Peninsula Barracks. For years standing sentinel at the entrance to the barracks, the Guard House was where soldiers were detained and arrivals met. In 1985 the barracks closed down and 10 years later the Guard House was converted into a home.

The Grade II listed house retains many of its period features including sash windows, grand stone fireplaces and the original cell windows. Thanks to a peaceful courtyard garden and secluded veranda, this four-bedroom home is calm and private, and is near Winchester Cathedral. The current owner still receives visits from former soldiers who were detained within the Guard House's walls.

It is on the market with Hamptons for £1.695million (01962 920265; hamptons.co.uk).

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