

OVERSEAS

# How to move to France and become a star winemaker

Ever dreamt of owning a vineyard and producing your own wine? The Bordeaux estates are waiting for you — but be patient



Château Les Carrasses in the Languedoc, southern France, is a 19th-century castle with hotel suites and self-catering properties overlooking vines

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Cathy Hawker | Wednesday September 13 2023, 12.01am BST, The Times

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Sally Evans makes the precarious business of wine production seem straightforward. After a senior career in marketing, she bought a vineyard in southwest France, started studying wine aged 52, bottled her first vintage at 58 and now, three years later and harvesting her seventh vintage, is an award-winning vintner with a thriving tourism business. Not bad for what she calls a “retirement hobby”.

“When my youngest son left home and after 16 years of corporate life I wanted a project,” says Evans. “I always thought about studying wine and had completed a few house renovations so decided to combine the two, buying a cottage in Fronsac, 35 minutes from Bordeaux, and a plot of vines with dilapidated farm buildings. I moved in knowing no one but the estate agent, and apart from the outstanding terroir and 35-year-old Merlot vines in this iconic wine region, I started from scratch with no estate name, no equipment, no reputation, no stock and minimal wine knowledge.”

Last year, her three hectares at the boutique winery Château George 7 produced 18,000 bottles of red and white wine that was sold worldwide from the US to Japan.



Sally Evans's vintages have all scored over 90 points at the Decanter World Wine Awards

“Starting with nothing means I made all the decisions, from choosing the estate name to setting a clear approach to sustainability,” she says. “Bordeaux has a wealth of extraordinary people with deep knowledge of the terroir and winemaking. I tapped into their expertise, relying on two expert consultants — one for wine production, the other as my oenologist.”

A severe frost caused the loss of most grapes in 2017, delaying her first full production until 2018. “That was a fabulous year and I took my first wine en primeur (the practice of selling wine before it’s bottled) where it was immediately chosen by the wine merchants Davy’s of London,” she says.





A two-bedroom apartment at Château Les Carrasses is on sale for €379,000 (£326,000) with Languedoc Property Finders



A furnished three-bedroom house with a courtyard garden at Château Les Carrasses is on the market for €395,000 with Languedoc Property Finders

“My businesses, both the wine and the tourism side, have grown and flourished beyond anything I could have imagined,” she says. “Wine has everything: nature, art, science, business and a wonderfully sociable product at the end.”



Producing your own wine is a common aspiration, says Alexander Hall, a Briton who has worked on wine estates worldwide and now lives near Bordeaux. He set up Vineyard Intelligence in 2010 to provide impartial advice for buyers, from initial discussions on what and where to buy through to post-acquisition assistance. Last year he provided advice on transactions in France, Italy, New Zealand and the US totalling over €100 million.



Château St Pierre de Serjac in the Languedoc, southern France, has a vineyard, hotel, spa and self-catering apartments



A two-bedroom house with a private garden at Château St Pierre de Serjac is on sale for €410,000 with Languedoc Property Finders

“For some, owning a vineyard is simply a business opportunity but for many it combines lifestyle elements too,” he says. “People are drawn to the basics of growing a crop and transforming it into a product by applying their own philosophy and personality. It can end badly of course, if a shortage of funds means necessary investments can’t be made or people focus on making the wine and underestimate the challenges of selling it. Start by studying the market, decide if there’s an opportunity and work from there. A long-term view, a minimum of ten years, and realistic expectations are essential.”



Hall emphasises the difficulty of generalising on prices with so many variables involved, but puts price points across Bordeaux vineyards from €10,000 per hectare to over €1 million for top appellations such as Pomerol, Saint-Émilion and Margaux. One hectare on average produces 6,500 bottles. “Official figures for 2022 show average prices in France range from €13,000 per hectare in the Languedoc to €220,900 in Burgundy, with a national average of €81,600 excluding Champagne,” he says.

The Languedoc in southern France is one of the country’s biggest wine-producing areas. The Irish developer Karl O’Hanlon went into partnership with the sixth-generation wine producer Laurent Bonfils in 2012 to set up Domaine & Demeure, which are hotels in restored Languedoc châteaux set among wine estates with fully managed properties for sale. Their three hotels have 200 hectares of vineyards, producing up to 1.3 million bottles a year. Property owners share in the annual harvest, each receiving 20 to 40 cases.





Domaine & Demeure partner Karl O'Hanlon and his wife Anita planted 60 vines last year

"The vines are an integral part of our estates, with Laurent and his family managing the wine business," says O'Hanlon, 51. "The Languedoc has produced wine for over 2,000 years. Guests sit on the terrace of our hotels and look over the vines and the view anchors them to that history."

At their own restored manor house in Colombiers, near Beziers, Karl and his wife Anita planted 60 vines last year, a hobby but also something that connects them to the ever-mercurial vagaries of the weather.

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- [Where to buy property right now in France, Spain and Italy](#)

"You need to be fleet-footed in the wine industry," says Karl. "The past three years have resulted in reduced harvests thanks to hailstones, frosts and this year, drought. Laurent has nerves of steel. Any wine producer must."

### Harbouring dreams of producing your own wine?

- Start small, especially if it is a retirement or hobby project. Buy less land of a good appellation than more of a less prestigious one *[says Sally Evans]*.
- Use local knowledge. Don't try to beat the locals at their own game.
- Create your own vision. Mine was never going to be a ninth-generation château. Instead I've created a boutique winery with a
- If buying an existing vineyard, buy stock to have some cash coming in while you work on future vintages.
- Have confidence in your existing skills. My marketing experience is invaluable.