Online Converted watermills for sale telegraph.co.uk/property

A vine way of life

It has never been easier – or cheaper – to own part of a French wine-making château, says ***Christopher Middleton***



NIK WHEELER

Growth industry: homes on wine-producing estates in the Languedoc-Roussillon can be bought from as little as £140,000

The prospect is guaranteed to turn the head of even the most businesslike Briton: go to France, buy a vineyard, and spend your days in the open, tending vines beneath the Mediterranean sun.

The reality is less romantic. The life of a winegrower is not a gentle meander through fields full of golden-hued grapes. It is a constant battle against the weather, disease, insects and obstructive officials.

On top of which, French winegrowers find the notion of a *rosbif* making *vin rouge* not so much a charming novelty as a downright cheek. Britons have needed a thick skin, as well as deep pockets, to succeed.

Now, however, a number of property initiatives provide British buyers with a route into the wine-growing business, without having to splash out millions on a vast and crumbling château. An apartment on a wine-growing estate can be yours for as little as £140,000.

The epicentre of this activity is the Languedoc-Roussillon area, the region of south-west France that takes in places such as Perpignan, Carcassonne and Montpellier, and stretches down from Marseille to the Spanish border. The grand, old wine-producing estates here have been overtaken by smaller-scale competitors. As a result, an increasing number of vast, seigneurial mansions have become redundant.

As indeed have their accompanying cottages, barns, stables, cellars and other outhouses. While there are no takers for these estates in their entirety, there are plenty of people who find themselves attracted to the area. They like its natural beauty and its prices, which are much cheaper than in Provence or the Côte d'Azur. Not forgetting the appealing waft of wine.

One such oenophile is Matthew Fletcher, 65. He and his wife bought a wine cellar at Château Les Carrasses, near Béziers, a beautiful, old estate built in 1886 (see pictures at telegraph.co.uk/property). It was once the centre of a large wine-producing empire, turning out up to one million bottles per year.

"We took a leap of faith, but the original structure has been beautifully converted," says Matthew. "We have three bedrooms, all en suite, plus a garden and our own swimming pool.

"No doubt about it, the wine aspect was one of the great attractions. And not just the history, the future, too. Before the conversion, there hadn't been any wine produced here for 25 years. Now an established wine firm has come on board. Last autumn we celebrated our first vendange.

"We've got all the excitement of living on a wine-producing estate, and we get 50 cases of the wine per year, yet we have none of the hassle of actually producing it."

Neither do the Fletchers have to worry about cleaning and maintaining the property, or renting it out when they aren't in residence (rates at Les Carrasses range from £150-£485 per night). All of that is handled by Domaine & Demeure, the firm that carried out the conversion.

The project has been so successful that the company's founder, Karl O'Hanlon, has already got a second 19th-century Languedoc wine estate conversion on the go: St Pierre de Serjac, at Puissalicon. He plans to keep the wine business going here, too.

In addition to the redevelopment work, his firm is helping to boost rentals by organising wine-growing and wine-appreciation courses.

Other companies are picking up on the added value that a wine connection brings. Estate agents Home Hunts are marketing a 19th-century Languedoc wine estate called Domaine de la Mandoune, near Béziers. On a smaller scale, French Character Homes is advertising a two-bedroome *gîte* in the Jurançon region for £640,000 (see details, right). It comes complete with a 3,000 sq m vineyard.

These days, if you want to grow wine in France, or even live the lifestyle, you don't have to do it the hard way. Although if you are serious about the wine, it is still advisable to do your homework. Barnsley-bred Jonathan Hesford certainly put in the hours. In 2006, he bought an ancient vineyard in Languedoc-Roussillon – now his Domaine Treloar estate. He studied for five years beforehand, including three years in New Zealand. But he sounds a cautious note to would-be viticulturists:

"There are three types of people who go into winemaking," he says. "People who learn the skills. Second, people who invest in a vineyard and employ others to run it. Finally, those for whom it has always been a dream. They go into it underprepared, and tend to fail.

"Running a wine estate is not a cushy job, but it is varied, healthy and fulfilling. We wouldn't swap it for our old lives."

For those unschooled dreamers, however, it has never been easier to live in a wine-maker's home. Even if you prefer to leave the grapes to the professionals.

- domainedemeure.com
- domainetreloar.com

Vintage tips

Invest in knowledge
- Either become an expert, or employ one.

Look near the airport
- Preferably two, with low-cost flights.

Find cheaper areas
- Prices in Burgundy, Bordeaux and Provences can start at £1.1 million, without the house.

In vino veritas
- Do you want to run a wine estate, or just own a little part of it?

Breathing space
- The Agricultural Commission has first dibs on land over one hectare. They may not exercise it, but can take some time to decide.

Make the harvest a festival time
- Hire locals to pick the grapes, and create a lively atmosphere.

Are you a récoltant or négociant?
- One grows the grapes, the other buys them in.

Don't expect to make money straight away
- A vineyard takes time to mature. Give it three years. See telegraph.co.uk/expat for a free guide to living in France.

For sale: four of the best

Domaine de la Mandoune
A 19th-century estate near Béziers with 111 acres of vineyards, redesigned as a small village, with 28 apartments, pool, tennis court, pitch-and-putt course. Maintenance and renting-out service. From £123,000. Agents: Chesterton Humberts (020 3040 8210; chestertonhumberts.com)





St Pierre de Serjac
32 period properties at Puissalicon, in the Hérault, with spa, pools and restaurant, in grounds of Languedoc wine château. Management team on site throughout the year. Prices: from £210,000 Agents: Domaine & Demeure (01993 832993; domainedemeure.com)

Jurançon
Restored farmhouse near Pau, with about two acres of vineyard, winery and two-bedroom guest cottage, producing wine grown in own fields and bottled with own label (400 bottles per year). Price: £640,000 Agents: French Character Homes (0033 559 12 28 13; frenchcharacterhomes.com)





Château Les Carrasses
A converted 19th-century château and estate buildings surrounded by vineyards near Béziers. The property can be rented as self-catering accommodation. Rental prices: £150-£485 per night Agents: Domaine & Demeure (01993 832993; domainedemeure.com)