

Pursuing a dream - as vigneron

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For examples of excellent French wines made by Brits, see [Made in France - by Brits](#). See also [this thread](#) on members' forum.

No-one knows exactly how many French wine enterprises are British-owned but the total must now be well into four figures. Wine, or rather the ability to drink copious quantities of it without involving the British Chancellor of the Exchequer in the transaction, has long been cited by the British as one of France's most obvious attractions. It is hardly surprising then that a substantial proportion of the hundreds of thousands of them who own French property has been tempted by the apparently bucolic life of a vigneron.

British wine merchants have been embedded in the French wine trade since at least the 12th century, when Bordeaux was ruled by the English. Today the likes of Tony Laithwaite with a vineyard and ageing cellar in Bordeaux and Paul Boutinot with his own production base in St-Verand, southern Burgundy, are some of the better-known examples of British wine trade investment in French wine production. In one small valley alone, Agly in Roussillon, at least two British-based Masters of Wine, Justin Howard-Sneyd and Sam Harrop, British wine importer Richards Walford and British wine writer (soon to be tv star) Monty Waldin are all now producing their own wines.

But the most interesting modern phenomenon is the proliferation of French wine domaines which have been either established or renovated by Brits with no previous experience in the field. They have mushroomed since the start of the current invasion of *les rosbifs* in the late 1980s but I remember sitting on a sunny terrace overlooking the Gironde at Château Loudenne in the Médoc as long ago as 1980 meeting a young British couple Sue and Alan Johnson-Hill, then regarded as social novelties, who had decided to apply what they had earned in Hong Kong to restoring the rundown Château Méaume in an outlying part of Bordeaux, where the wines are entitled only to the lowly Bordeaux appellation rather than anything grander.

This was all so long ago that with the property came a little-known consultant oenologist, one Michel Rolland, now the world's most famous winemaker with clients from Seattle to Bangalore. In the early 1980s the Johnson-Hills took him to London for the first time and installed him in the Cadogan Hotel, coincidentally the location chosen for a recent showcase of British-made French wines by the French Embassy in London. Four of the 12 exhibitors were from Bordeaux and all of them confessed to having made the same commercial mistake: being seduced by the house rather than the appellation. "Our property in the Premières Côtes de Bordeaux is very beautiful but had we known more about wine, I would have persuaded my husband to buy something a little smaller in St-Émilion which has a name," Heather Van Ekris told me about her Château des Mille Anges.

Philip Iles, who lost enthusiasm for his bars such as Garraways in the City of London after the 1993 Bishopsgate bombing, also bought in the Premières Côtes, in 1998. "It was a slightly emotional decision," he admits now, "because my wife Sarah liked the house. We were told Château Lezongars had a good vineyard but it was a leap of faith. In fact the soil and aspect turned out to be much better than we originally envisaged but selling the wine is tough, very tough. We can make as good a wine as some crus bourgeois or St Émilions but frankly I wish we'd got [Médoc cru bourgeois] Château Cambon Pelouse, whose current owner we beat to Lezongars, because Médoc wines fetch higher prices.

One Brit who, like Jonathan Maltus at Château Teyssier, has now invested directly in the famous St-Émilion appellation is Martin Krajewski, who is selling his headhunting business The Blomfield Group to concentrate on his wine interests in Bordeaux and (again like Maltus) Australia. His original acquisition was Château de Sours in the Entre-Deux-Mers, again entitled only to the Bordeaux appellation, and famous in the UK for its rosé. The previous owner (and co-founder of Majestic wine warehouses) Esme Johnstone "appeared out of the woodwork in 1996 to ask me to invest," according to Krajewski. "I'd only ever been when the sun was shining. I didn't realise until 2003 the roof that let in rain. I ended up acquiring it but if I could turn the clock back, I would never have made that decision.

However, it is the most beautiful property..." Arguably Krajewski's parties at Château de Sours are more famous than the wine and it is his new, small St-Émilion vineyard Clos Cantenac that excites him and his well-travelled young winemaker more.

Krajewski has the great advantage of possessing that essential ingredient for making a small fortune in wine: a large one. Nicholas and Karen Kitchener are much more representative of the new army of British vigneron. They had always wanted to do something with wine, managed to extract redundancy packages from Unisys and BT respectively and bought a 32-hectare property in Gascony with a working winery, bottling line and a vast stock of Armagnac for 1.2 million euros in 2004. Nick has even dropped the H in his first name as part of his French integration programme. He had A-level French and is so determined to get to grips with the French way of doing things that he has marked every bit of equipment with its French name in black marker pen so that he can converse with visiting technicians. They have no staff and are running *chambres d'hôte* as well as trying to establish much more profitable markets for their Domaine de Lauroux Vins de Pays des Côtes de Gascogne than the previous owner, who did not have to service a mortgage. "I have never worked so hard for so little," admits Nick, while Karen warns, "In winter Gascony – which I call 'Cheshire with hills' - is not a nice place". So do they regret their once-in-a-lifetime career move? She says No immediately. He agrees – most of the time.

Also in south west France, Jonathan Coulthard's investment in Domaine de Gourdon was relatively modest. Having given up engineering to train as a winemaker at Plumpton College near Brighton, and working a vintage for fellow Englishman Andrew Gordon at his Domaine du Grande Mayne/Winshare operation, he bought his nine hectares in Côtes de Duras in 2003 for 203,000 euros. He is clearly fascinated by winemaking and says his more cosmopolitan training has left him much better equipped to deal with the vagaries of vintages such as 2003 than his locally trained neighbours. But he admits it will be some time before he starts making money. "I'm realising more and more how important the marketing is. I had hoped it would be a wee bit easier." (The strength of the euro has presumably helped none of these British winemakers.)

This is a common refrain among virtually all wine producers the world over – not just the British battling with French wine bureaucracy in an overcrowded market. For sales acumen I'd put my money on ex City trader James Kinglake, who moved with his wife Catherine and young family to Domaine Begude in Limoux four years ago. They bought it from Englishman Bertie Eden, originally shared their Australian winemaker with yet another Englishman in the Languedoc, Graham Nutter, who is a near neighbour of several others, including adman Sir John Hegarty and his Kiwi partner Philippa Crane. Are there any French winemakers left down there?

I asked Walter McKinlay, whose southern Rhône wines are some of the most successful from a British domaine, whether Domaine de Mourchon was financially viable. He frowned. "Just about," he said cautiously, then smiled. "But it's a lovely lifestyle though."

See also my [recommended British-made French wines](#).