

Second-career viniculturists are being seduced by Napa Valley, south-east England and eastern Europe – as well as French *clos*, says Claire Wrathall. Photographs: Ian Sanderson.

As midlife-crisis fantasies go, reinventing yourself as a wine maker is an eternal favourite, and recently a succession of celebrities have made the dream a reality. Witness the prestige and commercially available wines being made by the likes of Francis Ford Coppola (Rubicon Estate in California), Sam Neill (a New Zealand Pinot Noir called Two Paddocks), Diesel owner Renzo Rosso (Rosso di Rosso from the Veneto), Mick Hucknall (the Sicilian Il Cantate) and, er, Cliff Richard (Vida Nova from the Algarve).

Half an hour spent surfing the *vignoble* pages of the website *france-prestige-real-estate.com*, however, and the prospect seems almost irresistible. For this, for want

of a better description, is vineyard porn, a list of seductively photographed châteaux and estates currently available to anyone with a few million euros to spare.

The last time I looked, there was a handsome turreted castle, cloaked in creeper, with witches-hat towers, 19 hectares of Côtes de Blaye and Côtes de Bourg estate “in perfect order” and the potential to produce 180,000 bottles of bordeaux annually, for €3.15m (about £2.15m). If that was more than you wanted to spend, there was a smaller, though still imposing, neoclassical house with a similar-sized estate “producing a classic right-bank wine” for half the cost, while €819,000 (about £557,000) will get you 2.5 hectares of 20-year-old vines in St-Emilion. For

those with serious ambition, there were also 11 hectares of Canon-Fronsac (€5.25m, about £3.6m), a Pomerol estate and a *prestigieux* Château Margaux classé, the latter two price on application. At which point it’s probably worth noting that the Geneva-based processed-meat magnate Michel Reybier reportedly paid more than €100m (about £68m) for the “super-second” claret Cos d’Estournel – the prettiest, most eccentric-looking château on the left bank, whose 2005s are fetching up to £1,200 a case en primeur (that is before they are bottled, and tax and import duty are applied).

But there isn’t an easy living to be made in Bordeaux. Despite the hype around the 2005 crus classés, the majority of wines made in the area sell for around €3 (about £2) a bottle. As César Compadre, the wine correspondent of the local newspaper *Sud-Ouest* has

written: “Everyone concentrates on the Ferraris of the Bordeaux wine industry. They are blind to the hordes of old Renaults and clapped-out scooters crawling along the roads.” But while this may be bad news for the local *vignerons*, it augurs well for incomers aspiring to live *la vie de château* and perhaps reinvent themselves as *vignerons* on the side.

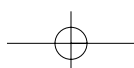
“It’s not all just sipping rosé on the terrace,” says James King, 36, formerly a Beijing-based agricultural-sector investments analyst, but for the past five years *châtelain* of Château Unang, which he shares with his wife, Joanna, and their (now bilingual) children and dogs, in the foothills of Mont Ventoux between the Rhône and Provence – an Appellation Contrôlée the senior English wine writer Hugh Johnson describes as “booming”.

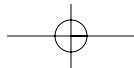
Even so, it’s hard not to view it as an idyllic life. “I don’t want to over-egg it,

Below and inset: James King and family at Château Unang, with its 35-year-old vines.



THAT'LL SUIT ME JU





but it is a unique place," says King. "Off by itself, surrounded by its own forest, with its own water on site: a natural spring that comes through the house and seven ponds that tumble down the hillside. The Italian aristocrats who lived here 150 years ago carved out their own bit of Italy," he adds, indicating the immaculate formal gardens.

Having searched southern France from Toulouse to the east of the country, the Kings settled on Château Unang, won over by its beauty, location – the fact that there are no neighbouring vineyards means the risk of infection from other vines is minimised – but most importantly by its potential. "Some friends who really know about vineyards looked at it and said they thought something very interesting could be made from it – wines far better than the current vendors were producing," says King.

"The vineyard was established – the vines are 35 years old – but the wines weren't. Before they'd been bulked to a co-operative,

and just a small amount was bottled for friends." Now the 20 hectares under cultivation – planted with Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Carignan, Cinsault, Roussanne and Clairette – produce 35,000 bottles a year: two whites, a rosé and three reds that are winning plaudits. "We are massively impressed by the Kings' Château Unang Côtes du Ventoux 2004. Yields are low, grapes are hand-picked. Fleshy and plump, brimming with notes of crushed red berry fruit and black pepper, this is a wonderfully easy wine," is how the red is described by the London wine merchant Goedhuis.

"It's been a struggle, though. There's always so much more to do," says King, who employs just three staff, one of whom



was working on the estate when he bought it. "But I like the fact that I'm doing the primary production, dealing with the raw materials and the farming. Then there's the wine-making itself, which requires a lot of creativity, and the marketing. So I think that there's enough to hold our

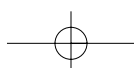
interest over time. And it is extremely satisfying, however much of my time is spent as a travelling salesman."

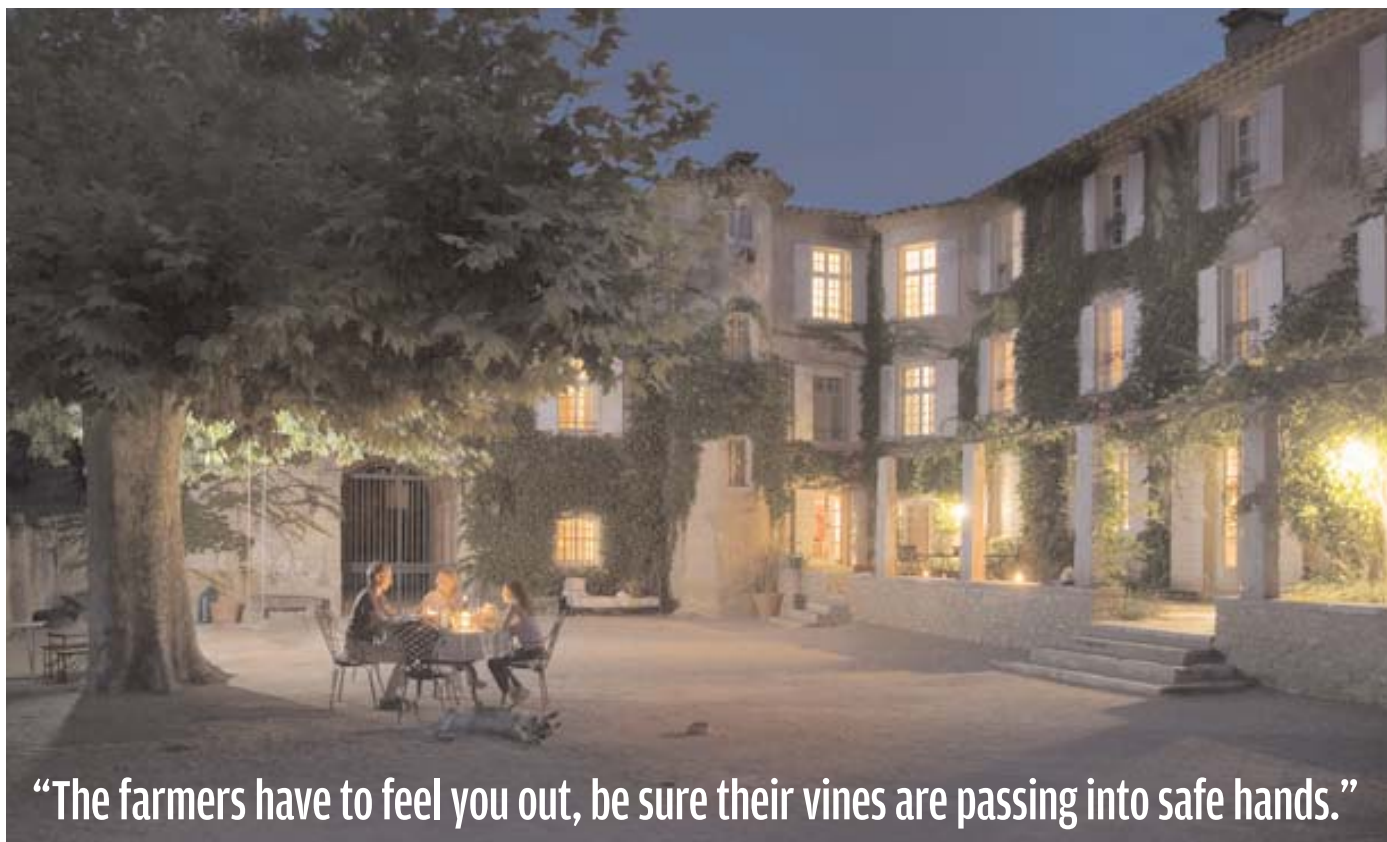
This is a sentiment echoed by business partners Hugo Stewart, a farmer from Wiltshire, and Paul Old – a former dancer with the Australian Ballet, Rambert Dance Company and Siobhan Davies – who own Les Clos Perdus around Peyriac de Mer in the Languedoc. Stewart already had a house in the area and Old a degree in wine science from Charles Sturt University in Australia, as well as wine-making experience there and in St-Emilion, when they decided to invest in some vines and set up their own winery. Rather than opt for a single estate, however, they bought 15 plots, totalling about 11 hectares, all within an hour's drive of each other, on which they grow six red grape varieties and one white. The town of Peyriac is on a flamingo-filled lagoon near the coast, so the plots here suit Mourvèdre and



JUST VINE

how to spend it





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Carignan which benefit from sea mist. Syrah, however, thrives on the northern slopes of the upper Agly valley an hour inland, while the hill-top sites suit Grenache, Cinsault and Lladoner Pelut. Les Clos Perdus – “the lost (or hidden, as they prefer it) vineyard” – consequently strives to preserve some obscure varieties that are in danger of dying out.

And some of the vines Old and Stewart nurture are more than a century old. Not that they were easy to come by, for simply acquiring land in this part of France presents its own challenge. “You start by going to a *notaire*, or solicitor, to find out if they’ve heard of anyone in the area who may want to sell some vines,” says Old. “The thing about farmers is they never want it announced that they’re selling their land. Of course there’s also word of mouth, and sometimes you just hear about something in a bar. Then you go and meet the person and sit down and chat for what seems like hours. Fortunately, Hugo is a great communicator with very good French. Eventually, you make some sort of vague agreement and have a drink on it. Then you meet them again, over a week or two, and in the end you get around to a price. It takes time. They have to feel you out, be sure their vines are passing into safe hands. There’s always a lot of advice – sometimes they’ll make it a condition that we prune things in a certain way – but it’s incredible how much the locals are prepared to share their knowledge.”

Stewart and Old farm organically and biodynamically – according to the lunar calendar. For, Old explains, “Just as the moon affects the oceans by creating tides, so it has an effect on the sap and the yeast in the vines, causing them to rise and fall.” (This may sound flakily New Age, but it’s an ancient method embraced by increasing numbers of wine makers, and even Marks & Spencer schedules its wine-tastings according to the rhythms of the cosmos.)

It’s also a life of tough physical work, though at least August tends to be a quiet month, says Old, when “all you can do is pray for good weather. But in May, for instance, I was crawling up a hillside pulling up weeds, which is really the only way to do it if we’re going to stay organic. That’s why we call our premium wine [an impressive, earthy Lladoner Pelut-Syrah blend from Maury] L’Extrême.” It’s a wine that *FT* wine

correspondent Jancis Robinson described as being “particularly struck by... Their 2004s sing out with fruit and confidence,” she writes on her website. “The most distinctive, L’Extrême, sings, dances and tells jokes.” *Pas mal* for their second-ever vintage.

If making your own wine sounds like too much work, it is possible to own a vineyard with which your only contact need be taking delivery of a few cases of wine from time to time. Gayda Vineyards, which owns land in the Minervois part of the Languedoc, and whose wines are sold under the Archet label, operates a scheme called Lifestyle Vineyard Management, aimed at people who have “always dreamed of owning a vineyard without the hassle”. It sells plots of approximately 1,200sq m for £14,500 to £22,500 in return for which



the owner receives the title deed to the land, which will be managed by Gayda for a period of 10 years, after which you can renew the management contract (the scheme is so new that no one has yet worked out what this will be likely to cost) or take over the maintenance of the vines – usually Grenache, Aramon or Cinsault – yourself.

The land must by law remain a vineyard, so if you don’t fancy one of these options you’ll have to sell. Owners can visit at any time, help with the *vendange*, involve themselves in the wine-making process (or not) and receive 960 bottles of L’Archet wines – which have been stocked by Gordon Ramsay’s Boxwood Café and the Savoy Grill – delivered to their homes, every six months, four cases at a time. For anyone who’s always longed to see their name on a bottle, they will also customise your labels. Just don’t assume your wine will necessarily

have been made from the vines on “your” land.

If even that sounds too hands-on, Sedlescombe, an organic vineyard in East Sussex – one of about 350 in the UK – runs a vine sponsorship scheme. Established in 1979 by Roy Cook, who had inherited some land from his grandfather, the 17-acre vineyard now produces 15,000 bottles a year, including a sparkling Cuvée Bodiham Brut. Under its Rentavine scheme, for £75 a year sponsors can visit the vineyard, enjoy tastings and buy wines at a discount. They also receive regular e-mail updates from their allocated “wine maker”, on “how the wine is made, and how each variety and vintage is shaping up before they are bottled”. In other words, it offers a thorough introduction to the process that



Above left: Hugo Stewart (left) and Paul Old at Les Clos Perdus. Above right: Stewart at work, spraying the vines organically.

could prove invaluable to anyone wanting to learn about wine-making and size up the potential of growing vines in southern England.

For, according to Angus Richards of the Canterbury branch of the property company Strutt & Parker, “There’s a lot of excitement about English sparkling wine.” Over the past year he has noted a surge of interest from French champagne houses looking to buy land in Hampshire, Kent and Sussex, where the south-facing chalky terroir is similar to that in Champagne, just 80 miles south, but less exhausted by over-cultivation and less susceptible to frost.

“Last year we were dealing with one of the top-10 French champagne houses,” he says, “and I’ve just been approached by someone looking to buy on behalf of another French champagne producer. Champagne is a very limited area, and acquiring new vineyards there costs hundreds of thousands of



Above left and right: Château Unang and its La Source 2004 Côtes du Ventoux.

pounds an acre, whereas the land [for viniculture] in south-east England is typically changing hands for

£3,000-£4,000 an acre.”

Whether south-east England ever comes to rival Champagne remains to be seen, but since 1979 Mumm has been established in Napa Valley, an area that for the moment remains a great deal easier to secure a vineyard in and has the infrastructure with which to turn your grapes into wine. Don’t expect to find a bargain, though – especially since Californian wines beat some of the finest burgundies and bordeaux in Berry Brothers’ and Copia’s much-publicised blind-tasting by 18 of the world’s pre-eminent oenophiles last May. Premium properties tend to be sold through Sotheby’s, with prices starting at around \$3.8m (about £2m).

If, however, it’s a bargain you’re after, you’re better off investigating eastern Europe. A house in Slovenia’s Dolenjska province, with a small parcel of land and the option to buy neighbouring vineyards can cost as little as €145,000 (about £99,000) through the Austria-based online estate agent Euroburo. It also markets properties in other wine-producing nations – Croatia, Slovakia and Hungary – where, as it happens, Gérard Depardieu, perhaps the most successful and certainly the most prolific and adventurous celebrity wine maker, is said to be scouting for vines. (It has also been reported that he is looking in Ukraine.) He is a man who has successfully made wine in Algeria and Morocco, though the heart of his ever-expanding empire remains in France. Putative wine makers might therefore do well to look east. ♦

AND WINE NOT?

Château Unang, 00334-9069 9137; www.chateauunang.com. **Les Clos Perdus**, 00334-6841 1070; www.lesclosperdus.com. **English Wine Producers**, 01536-772 264; www.englishwineproducers.com. **Euroburo**, www.euroburolimited.co.uk. **France Prestige Real Estate**, 00334-6679 3662; www.france-prestige-real-estate.com. **Gayda Vineyards**, 01233-636 365; www.buyvineyard.co.uk. **Sedlescombe Organic Vineyard** 0800-980 2884; www.englishorganicwine.co.uk. **Strutt & Parker**, 020-7629 7282; www.struttandparker.co.uk. **Sotheby’s International Realty**, 001707-935 2288; www.siroffices.com/brokerages/winecountry/home.asp.