

Some vines with your finca?

Property | The pandemic has not stopped wine enthusiasts shopping for small 'hobby' vineyards in Spain, Italy and France, writes *Liz Rowlinson*

When David Smith examined his frost-damaged vines last month after France's extreme cold snap, he knew it might have been a lot worse. Some vigneronns lost 90 per cent of their crop when temperatures dropped to record lows. But the late budding of his Provençal vineyard meant that he only lost half of his Grenache grapes and a quarter of his Syrah. Across the country, about a third of the wine crop is thought to be ruined.

The retired R&D consultant, originally from the UK, usually keeps 20 per cent of his grapes to make 350 bottles and sells the rest to a négociant – a wine merchant who buys grapes from small farmers to pay the costs of their expensive hobby.

"I will lose 40 per cent of income [this year], which is worse than the frosts last year, the 2019 drought and the 2018 rains – the past four years have been bad for wine growers," he says. "But you've probably heard the adage that if you want to make a small fortune in wine, start with a big one."

Winemaking might be a precarious business, but that does not deter enthusiasts like Smith from embracing the age-old tradition. Even during the pandemic, buyers from around the world have been looking for "hobby" vineyards in France, Spain and Italy – these smaller vineyards typically stretch to a couple of hectares and can produce up to 7,000 bottles a year.

Along with providing the opportunity for buyers to impress house guests with their "own" wine, this niche market also

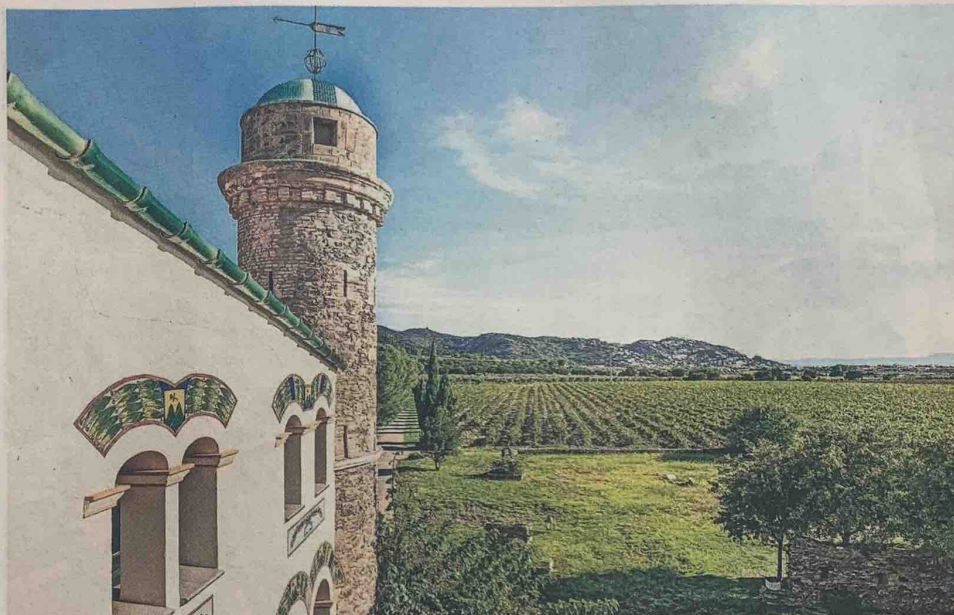
attracts those keen to produce their own organic or bespoke vintages.

"Some of the successful entrepreneurial people that are now buying small vineyards innovate with techniques and grape varieties to produce some great-quality wines," says Michael Baynes of Vineyards Bordeaux, an agency that typically sells about 10 vineyards a year, though only half that in 2020.

"People generally want a stone bastide property looking across beautifully maintained vines," says Chris Moore of property agent Home Hunts, who specialises in selling hobby vineyards in France's Var region. "Parisians buy them but also Dutch, Germans and Americans – I sold a property with a hectare of young vines to a buyer in Laguna Beach [in California] last month, who will be coming to live here."

As with Smith, an early-retirement plan is why Oklahoma City-based surgeon Robert Tibbs, 53, is shopping for a small vineyard in Tuscany or Germany with four partners and a collective budget of €4m. "Regulations and taxation in the top four wine-producing states in the US are brutal so we are looking to Europe. We are all wine geeks and I won't be sitting around doing nothing when retire soon."

Planting new vines costs about €30,000 per hectare, and it will take four years to get any wine from new vines. Moore recommends finding a property with existing vines. "But beware that vines can be under long-term rental contract to a local farmer – fermanage agreements – for many years."



A 10-bedroom property and estate with 32ha of vineyards and 1ha of olive groves on the Costa Brava, €4.8m; (inset) Cabernet Franc grapes — Albany



(Above) A six-bedroom château and vineyard in Bordeaux, producing 10,000 bottles a year, €3.18m through Christie's International Real Estate

Many hobbyists prefer this, though. It can be a good way of having them looked after, and it shifts the financial risk of extreme weather events to the farmer, who may give you a few bottles in return for a reduction in the rent.

The French rural land agency SAFER reports that there were 9,200

vineyard sales in 2019, with figures for last year not out yet but thought to be considerably lower.

The price of a mature vineyard depends on the *appellation* (the wine region classification). Champagne is the most expensive area, averaging €1.108m per hectare in 2019, then Bourgogne-Beaujolais-Savoie-Jura at €189,200, although in parts of Bordeaux-Aquitaine prices go up to €2.3m per hectare (Pauillac).

According to SAFER, prices rose in most French areas between 2018 and 2019, with the price per hectare in Bordeaux-Aquitaine increasing 3.4 per cent to €105,100; and the prices in the Loire and Bourgogne areas both rising 4 per cent.

It was the relative affordability of the Loire region – €32,300 per hectare

on average in 2019 – that caught the eye of Oslo-based entrepreneur Andrew Marshall. He bought a neglected three-bedroom house in Saumur with four hectares of AOC Anjou vines – managed by an award-winning local vigneron – for €183,600.

He hopes that its Cabernet Franc grapes will produce 15,000 bottles a year to supply Carlowrie Castle in Edinburgh, the mansion that he owns and runs as a hotel.

"I love Crémant [a sparkling wine made with the same technique as champagne] and I want to create a rosé version," he says. "We are in the middle of grubbing up [removing] some old vines to plant new ones so not all our crop was affected by the frosts."

Even without extreme frosts, making a wine to your own taste can haemorrhage money, as Ugo Bertolotto from Genoa admits. He flew in an expert

House&Home

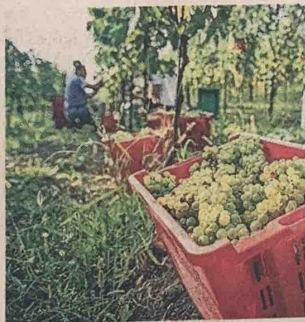


Continued from page 3

French winemaker to help him produce a “Bordeaux-like” red at his eight-bedroom estate near Siena, with half a hectare of vines.

“I didn’t want the ‘basic Chianti’ it had been producing so I thought why not make my own wine?” says Bertolotto, who works in oil and gas. “It produces 2,800-3,200 bottles a year of a Super-Tuscan red which costs me way more money than it needs to — and is much more than I can drink or give away.” Bertolotto has decided to sell his vineyard, which is available through Casa & Country Italian Property for €10m.

A Chianti Classico vineyard between Florence and Siena can cost up to €150,000 per hectare, while in Montalcino (which produces Brunello and Sassicaia wines) it can be double that, says estate agent Jeremy Onslow-Macaulay. Limits to supply keep up prices. “In the Brunello and Chianti Classico areas producers are rarely, if



ever, granted planting rights,” he says. Italian winemakers have endured a rough few years. In 2019, extreme weather conditions — floods, storms and heatwaves — were to blame for a 12 per cent drop in wine production in Italy, according to ISTAT, the Italian statistics bureau. With exports dropping due to the pandemic, the govern-



(Main pic and above) A Provençal mas in Cotignac with 2.1ha of vines under contract to a local farmer, €750,000. (Above left) A harvest of white grapes — Getty Images

ment ordered 70m bottles of surplus wine to be turned into hand sanitiser.

Yet on the Spanish island of Mallorca the appetite for new vineyards has led to some recent restrictions, according to Jaume Fullana, a third-generation winemaker who project-manages vineyards for Dutch, Swedish, Belgian, British and German owners.

i / BUYING GUIDE

Appellation refers to the regulation of the area where a wine is made. French wine is classified by quality into three tiers: appellation d’origine protégée (AOP), which replaced AOC as the top level in 2012, vin de pays (IGP) and then vin de table (VDT). In Italy and Spain the tiers are similar though with the top two tiers DOPG and DOP or DO and DOP respectively, below which are two tiers of unregulated table wine.

Despite Covid-19, Italy, France and Spain — which together account for 53 per cent of the world’s wine production in 2020 — saw increases in output over 2019 with rises of 3 per cent, 11 per cent and 21 per cent respectively, according to estimates from the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV).

In traditional European viticulture, 10,000 vines per ha are planted, with each vine yielding about 0.5kg of fruit, or approximately 0.35 litres of wine — so, one hectare produces c3,500 bottles.

“No one wanted Mallorcan wine 24 years ago when we restarted the family winery but now it’s a popular European dream to have a handful of hectares at your finca,” he says. “In 2020, there were 2,000 hectares registered on Mallorca, compared to 1,200 in 2000. In December the Spanish government made it far harder to plant a new vineyard.”

He says it costs €5,000-€10,000 a year to maintain a hectare of vines on the island — more on the rocky terraces of the Tramuntana mountain range, where the pollen can produce a more complex varietal.

Former investment banker Walter Kraushaar, originally from Germany, planted vines beside the farmhouse he shares with his American partner William Stanley in Inca, a town in the centre of the island. They planted one hectare to make a “Provençal-style pale rosé” and have planted more and opened a bodega at Finca Los Dos Caballeros for tastings. They are leasing parcels of it to wine enthusiasts (from €120 a year for six vines producing six bottles).

“My grandparents were winemakers, so I hoped it was in the blood,” says Kraushaar. “The leasing is a nice way to connect with people and cover our costs. But we’re now thinking of exporting the wine to the US. It’s not really just a hobby any more.”