

A local's view

A combination of family and vineyards led **John** and **Mary Bruton Sandifer** to a new life as winemakers in Gironde



What were you doing before you took over *Domaine de la Tourbeille* in 2011?

John was a consultant in the IT industry and I am a writer. We were living in New York and John's job brought us to Europe when our three children were small. His mother was French and his family had a Bordeaux estate, La Tourbeille, where he spent his childhood summers.

What is the history of *Domaine de la Tourbeille*?

Legend has it the château served as a hunting lodge for Henri IV in the 16th century. It became an elegant house with stones quarried from the Dordogne river and an agricultural compound. Barrels were rolled out from the original winery down to boats on the river destined for Bordeaux and England. The property was acquired after WWI by John's great uncle, an injured hero who later ceded it to John's mother. The American connection comes from John's father, an architect. His guiding principle for renovations in 1968 was that it must still "bathe in its historic juices".

Why did you decide to go into the wine business?

We helped John's parents manage the property for years while living in Paris. The locals told us our *terroir* was "exceptional" and we always dreamed of finding out just how good the wine could be.

But we also knew taking over the vineyard would be a huge venture. When our last child went off to school, the time was right. We put our hearts into discovering the character of our *terroir* and making wine that reflected its unique taste profile.

Did you have any experience in winemaking?

No. We read books avidly and hired an excellent oenologue



John and Mary enjoying a relaxing moment out from their busy lives



The latest generation of winemakers



The domaine was inherited from John's parents



Domaine de Tourbeille is a 25-acre vineyard above the River Dordogne



There are amazing views from the property

who held our hands through every step. When our first vintage was ready, she called it “the most coddled wine in all of Gironde”! Through the years we’ve made mistakes, but our lack of experience also made us conscientious. It was probably carefulness and passion that saved us from our ignorance.

On your blog you write that you risked your savings to revive a vineyard - what are some of the challenges you've faced?

After we began making wine, John's mother passed away and the family decided to sell the château. We bought their

shares to keep the remaining 100 acres of agricultural land. Our move to the farm meant constructing a new winery, investing in new equipment, dealing with restrictions caused by our farmer's lease, a complete gutting and renovation of the farmhouse, a lost vintage in 2013 and continuous climate worries.

Perhaps our greatest challenge was sales. Just as we began, the traditional Bordeaux sales channels (the *négoçant* model) contracted. Shut out of these avenues, we had to invent our own. We developed a friends-and-family network

in France, the UK and the US, sold the wine at our Taverne Belvedere and through a local alliance of winemakers. In time, the wine was discovered by importers.

What changes have you made to the property?

The agricultural property had fertile land and amazing views but needed renovation. We transformed an old stone barn to create a winery next to the vineyard and bought custom-fit stainless steel tanks and other equipment. Of the two 17th-century farmhouses, we gutted one completely.

Tell us more about the vineyards and your wines?

The 25-acre vineyard is perched on a cliff dotted with prehistoric caves, high above the River Dordogne. Like St-Émilion, Juillac has been planted with vines since Roman times. The roots reach down into the flint-limestone bedrock, which adds a touch of minerality. The hilltop offers 360-degree sunshine while the limestone-clay soil provides nourishment and some protection against drought.

The appellation is Bordeaux Supérieur. Varietals are merlot, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon. The wines have won



prestigious awards, including the Concours de Paris, Bettane & Desseauve, Guide Hachette and Revue du Vin de France. Until the 1950s, the property was a self-sustaining polyculture farm with diverse crops, animals and orchards. We're planning a modified return to this model by cultivating a diversity of crops, both to anticipate climate change and align with our biodiversity ethics.

You've lived in cities such as Paris and London; how is life in the countryside different?
We're more involved in our local community. I am a

member of the musical Festival de Gensac and John is on the village council. We live by the seasons: spring brings intense work in the vineyard and maintenance of orchards and fields. In summer, we're busy with tours and tastings, hand-labour in the vineyard and work at the *taverne*. September through December is harvest and vinification. During winter, we focus on pruning the vineyard, bottling and sales. Happily, the quieter rhythm allows me some time for my writing. The best change has been working as a family. After years of living far apart, it's a luxury to be so close.

Do you speak French?

John learned from his mother in childhood. I studied French in university, then took night classes here. The best teacher was John's mother's cook. I spent hours listening, talking and learning her recipes!

What advice would you give to anyone considering going into the wine business?

Take classes in winemaking and vineyard management. Enlist the help of an oenologue who understands the market, your goals and budget. Hire an accountant who can inform you about legal structures for setting up a business

and about labour laws, tax implication and social charges. A realistic financial and sales plan is key.

What do you enjoy most about your life as winemakers?

It has been exciting to learn new skills; from training in taste and smell and exploring how to improve the soil, to the complexities of running an agricultural business. For us, winemaking is about the stewardship of land. We create something that provides pleasure and still try to give back to the earth. ■

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