

# Lessons from “Le Terroir”: Caring for Vineyards, Saving the Earth

Mary Bruton Sandifer, member of AW Aquitaine, is a writer and vineyard owner who combines these passions with caring for the environment.



**Mary Bruton Sandifer**

I was born in Washington DC, the first daughter after four boys. Though spoiled by my brothers, three younger sisters brought a mantle of responsibility. Our parents were very strict, so we children became a tribe, defending each other in our secret mischief-making. We loved the fun of our grandparents’ farm in Michigan. Barns, animals, cousins! My grandmother grew their food, killed the chickens as needed, milked cows, made her own butter, bread, jam... AND she sent her eldest daughter to the city for a proper education. She told me later, “farming is a hard life.” Indeed it is.

My favorite childhood game was playacting with siblings and friends. I made up a story (often about covered wagons crossing the American

plains), assigned roles, and we acted it out in the backyard for days, lost in our imaginations. My sixth-grade teacher told my parents I would grow up to be a writer.

As a teenager, I went to a wonderful girls’ school in Maryland, Regina, which emphasized concern for others. When we demanded our “freedom,” the teachers asked, “But what will you do with your freedom?” They taught us to think critically and put our ethics into action. One teacher sponsored me for a summer study program at Oxford University. It was my first experience of Europe, and I was utterly smitten.

## Early Adulthood

I attended Catholic University in DC, a superb school where I studied Literature. After graduating, I worked 12 hours a day waiting on tables for money to go back to Europe. I adored France and Italy, learned those languages and met international students who opened my eyes to how the USA is perceived from abroad, the positive and the negative.

When I came back stateside, I worked at the National Endowment for the Arts in a clerical position surrounded by exotic luminaries from the art world. That created a hankering to experience the excitement of New York City. There I met John, my French-American husband, in a love-at-first-sight moment. Working as a freelance writer in such a demanding market was an excellent challenge to hone my skills. We didn’t have much money, but we had friends, opportunities and a beautiful view of the Hudson River. A daughter was born, and I think NYC is the place where we grew our wings.



Me aged about five



The Sandifer Family

## Mid Adulthood

In our 30s, my husband's work brought us to Europe. Brussels to London to Paris, adding two sons along the way. It was enriching and fun, but not always easy - starting over, no friends, small children, husband away on travel...

Paris became our favorite home. The children attended a bilingual school, and I finally had time for some playwriting projects (expanding on the backyard version). Two staged readings allowed me to work with actors and observe audience reactions - what worked, what didn't. This was essential to the storytelling craft.

Meanwhile, we spent our free time helping John's parents on their estate outside Bordeaux. When they died, we decided to take over the property and make wine. It was a crazy leap of faith. *Grapes and Old Stones* is my chronicle of our discoveries, struggles and joys. The biggest surprise was when our three children returned from the States to join us. Among their many projects was opening a restaurant here where we have spectacular views of the Dordogne valley.

Daily family life is focused on making wine and renovating this property, once a polyculture farm. Henri advises on soil remediation; Julien is head of vineyard operations. Grandchildren now mark our 5th generation at Domaine La Tourbeille.

## The importance of the environment

When everything is urgent - war, corruption, a pandemic, poverty - how can we decide what to tackle first? But every pressing issue pales when you ask: if the land is poisoned or sterile or appropriated for private gain, what will we eat? If the water is polluted, what will we drink? If the air is toxic, what will we breathe? If we ruin our habitat, nothing else matters. To solve any problem, we have to be healthy, and much of our health depends on the quality of our food, water

and air. All this impacts every other issue and women in particular. When there is access to proper nutrition, water, and air, education becomes possible, and educated mothers have healthier children. The health of mothers and children isn't just a moral imperative; it's a starting place, a lynchpin in long-term economic and geopolitical stability.

## Living climate change

Our life changed when we took over this land. We saw how our neighbors, small-scale farmers, are the canary in the mine for environmental issues. They live climate change every day, and they are penalized when policymakers prioritize large industrial farms even though we know "local" is increasingly vital to agricultural quality.

Farmers have been discouraged, which is urgent because so many are now retiring. This threatens the transmission of agricultural experience of people who have worked the land for generations. To say nothing of the loss of fertile land if it is sold and paved over, as happened in the Maryland suburbs in the 1970s.

About 10 years ago, I learned that laws were quietly passed that would erode the right of farmers to freely exchange seeds as they have done for thousands of years. This event spurred me to write a novel about the greed that threatens seed sovereignty and traditional know-how.

Fortunately, there's been a backlash in Europe. Support is growing for "local" and small agricultural businesses. The pandemic has been a wake-up call for the need to grow basic food in our home territory. People used to say that in order to "feed the world," we need colossal farms, and we are discovering that is not true.

## Learning to care for a vineyard

When we took over the vineyard, we were novices. We read books and hired an oenologist to accompany us, but mostly we are self-taught. Neighbors have been generous, sharing advice, time, cuttings, and even equipment. Our passion



La Tourbeille, with my husband John, a rosé moment on the hilltop with the river valley beyond



Tree planting in 2014

is the soil. We had no *a priori*, except that healthy soil will make healthy plants and thus delicious fruit and vegetables. We witnessed the degradation caused by industrial methods (compacted soil, asphyxiated roots, lack of mineral uptake, accumulation of heavy metals, the loss of natural “helpers” due to toxic chemicals...). So we’re learning techniques like sowing particular plants between crop rows to aerate compacted soil, extracting heavy metals, and encouraging helper insects; the use of certain fungi to improve the mycorrhizal (symbiotic) function, which boosts the plant’s immune system and health; replanting biodiversity hedges... It’s all about restoring the balance so that Nature can defend herself.

### Industrial farming makes me mad

The global explosion of industrial animal farming makes me angry. The increased demand for meat has caused deforestation and the loss of precious natural habitats. Industrial production often means cruel conditions for the animals, antibiotics, and hormones that cross into the human body with significant health issues, sewage runoff that fouls the water, and the rise of carbon emissions. This supermarket meat may be cheaper, but many people don’t realize they’re likely paying more for it anyway through subsidies via taxes.

It was only a hundred years ago that meat was considered a “nice-to-have,” a treat for occasional meals. The meat eaten back then was wholesome and nutritious. To turn this around, we need to buy from farmers who produce ethically raised chicken, pork, beef... Yes, it costs more, but the idea is to eat less but eat better and include a variety of grains and pulses. You don’t have to be vegetarian to opt out of the industrial meat paradigm and reap health benefits from a more plant-based diet.

### Food production in France

Here in France, the tide may finally be changing towards “local.” For example, in 2020, a rule

instructs school cafeterias to serve organic food, source it locally, and offer a menu with no meat at all once a week. This change prompted a surge in support for local vegetable growers, with regions providing land and some financing. And, of course, it means children are experiencing plant-based options to meat in a normalized context. This is how the world changes, through the children.

Another recent development: programs to encourage young people to go into farming. Many farmers are retiring, and their children are not always taking over the farm. Our son has been accompanied by the Chamber of Agriculture. It’s not perfect, but we’re impressed by the caliber of passionate people who helped.

And it’s interesting to note that the grandparents of most French people our age lived in the countryside, and many were farmers. The result is that people still have a feeling for “the land.” Even if they are city lovers, they maintain a nostalgia about farms and ancestors, a love of good (real) food, and a reverence for meals. And many still know that food comes from the earth, not from a supermarket aisle.

### Making change

Change only happens if you reach people’s hearts and minds. We can’t hit adversaries over the head, they need to see another perspective. Since good stories “show, don’t tell,” they are a brilliant way to open people’s eyes. A story can frame a crisis, so it’s personal and up close. If people feel the danger, they might want to find a solution. Inspired by valiant local people and fear for the future of some traditional practices, I wrote *Jeanne: Seeds of Infinity*. It tells the story of an aristocratic young French woman in a world where seed sovereignty and traditional herbal remedies are banned. Her botanist father is imprisoned for defying the new laws, and her family ends up losing everything.



Serving our wine at the Fête du Village

I think the best I can offer our world is stories. I am gratified when readers of *Grapes and Old Stones* tell me the anecdotes help them feel that nature truly is precious and fragile.

### The power of plants

I'm fascinated by the power of plants to heal and the ancient knowledge of healers who cared for their villagers before modern medicine. I've been cultivating a medicinal garden for years, with plants for small cures and herbal teas. Some are ordinary but have wonderful properties! Like Rosemary, Bourrache, Calendula, Verveine... My favorite is Hélichryse italicum, which heals bruises and perhaps also "Les bleus d'âme" (bruises of the soul). The garden is also intended to provide flowers most months of the year to feed honeybees and hungry, hard-working insects and pollinators. If I could start a new career, I would raise bees and concoct herbal remedies.

### Finding inspiration

I would love to meet Barbara Kingsolver, biologist, writer, environmental champion. Her book *The Poisonwood Bible* inspired me beyond description. She weaves a riveting tale that takes place in the Republic of Congo in the 1960s. It makes us care about the fate of the characters and understand how self-righteous and rigid dogma can destroy an emerging culture, nature,

and ourselves. She lives on a farm in southern Appalachia where she writes, works her land, connects with her neighbors and local traditions. I love her sense of modesty and the keen, loving, and critical eye with which she writes about human nature and the richness of Mother Nature.

**Editors Note:** Mary's book *Jeanne: Seeds of Infinity* was published in December 2021. The book is set in rural France in a time when traditional customs persist and the wisdom of herbal healers is respected; a place where Nature still unfolds her magic. Click the link to find out more about it.



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