

# GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

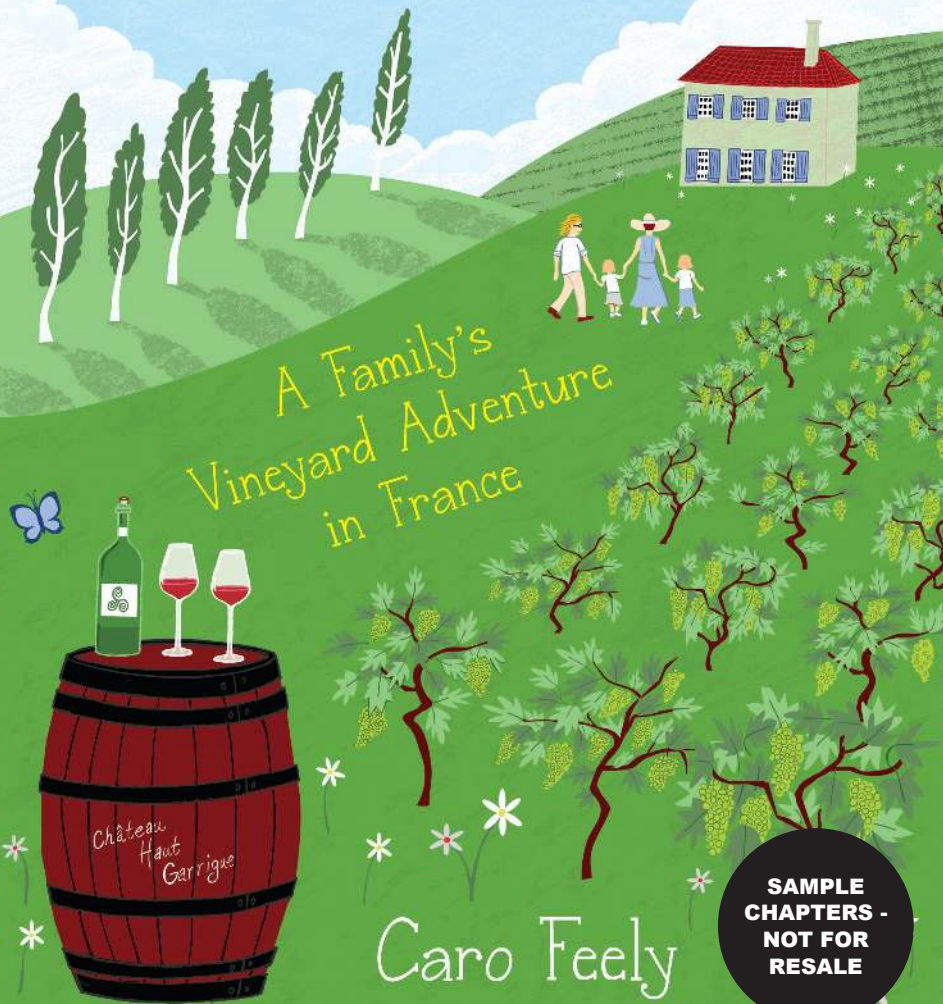
*'a beautifully written tale of passion and guts'*

Alice Feiring, author of *Naked Wine*

A Family's  
Vineyard Adventure  
in France

Caro Feely

SAMPLE  
CHAPTERS -  
NOT FOR  
RESALE





# **GRAPE EXPECTATIONS**

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Summersdale Publishers Ltd  
46 West Street  
Chichester  
West Sussex  
PO19 1RP  
UK

[www.summersdale.com](http://www.summersdale.com)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84953-257-0

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A Family's  
Vineyard Adventure  
in France

Caro Feely



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## *About the Author*

Caro Feely worked as a project manager and IT strategy consultant in Ireland and South Africa before trading it all in to pursue her dreams. She now runs a successful organic wine estate with wine school and gîte rental business in the Dordogne Valley in France with her husband, Sean.

## *Note from the Author*

This is a true life story; however, some characters, events and place names have been changed to protect the privacy of the people concerned.

Dedicated to our new friends in Saussignac, our loyal customers and my family, Sean (SF), Sophia and Ellie, without whom this adventure would not have been possible.

*Wine in itself is an excellent thing.*

Pope Pius XII

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# Prologue

I took a deep draught and swirled it around, feeling the warming sensation of alcohol on the back of my throat. The wine filled my mouth with plum and blackberry. The finish had a hint of spice and an attractive saline minerality.

‘Delicious.’ I licked my lips. The wine filled me with joy. A picture of a vineyard drenched in sunlight formed in my mind. Sean drew me rudely back to the lounge of our semi-d.

‘Did you get the spice?’

I nodded.

‘How can they be in liquidation if they make wine this good?’ I asked.

We should have stopped right there. We were driven by something that went beyond logic: a decade-long dream that took us to places we could not have imagined.





## Chapter 1

# *Beware the Dream*

‘I think this wine is like an ageing dancer. Her moves are slow and supple. Then she performs a pirouette just like she did when she was younger.’

Pierre-Jacques dipped the pipette into the wine-stained oak barrel, transferring tastes swiftly to our outstretched glasses. We stood in the entrance to his cellar, a cave hewn out of the chalky cliffs, captivated by the softening sun and his sensuous descriptions. The wine was smooth and serene across my tongue before fresh raspberries twirled at the finish.

‘The wines are grown. I am not a winemaker. I merely help the grapes’ transformation.’

Pierre-Jacques, a compact man with dark curly hair and a twinkle in his eye, chronicled the weather of the vintage, the monthly progress in the vineyard, the gentle shepherding of the harvest. Something stirred in our blood. No longer was wine just wine, but a living liquid bright with memory. We had caught a glimpse of the soul of winemaking and were smitten.

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After that revelation, we had sought out artisanal wines from French vigneron, people whose lives were expressed in what they bottled. Sean took night classes in wine. I took French. We both dreamed.

Now I was leaning on the kitchen counter, staring at grey drizzle, grabbing a few moments of peace between baby feeds and thinking back to our first visit to that French vineyard. I reflected on how our lives had developed since that fateful day. Every spare cent went into our vineyard fund. We researched, studied and saved. I was an IT-strategy-consultant-turned-early-stage-venture-capitalist and Sean, an investment writer for the asset management business of a large bank. We were typical yuppies but with a long-term mission to change our lives.

Then our first daughter Sophia was born. A malformation of her oesophagus led to five hours of life-critical surgery at less than a day old. It was a time of extreme feeling: powerful love as a first-time mother, fear that she would be taken from us and desperate hope that she would stay. For a year we thought of nothing but her health. She survived – more than that, she glowed with vitality. With Sophia healed, our thoughts returned to a vineyard of our own. We searched the Internet for our dream vineyard most evenings and weekends but had found nothing.

The dream was in fact seeded long before Pierre-Jacques. Sean's grandfather, long dead, was a winegrower. In our mid-twenties we had nearly bought a vineyard but a career opportunity with the large technology multinational I worked for put the vineyard on hold. Now, ten years later, here we were, confirmed city dwellers living on M&S dinners.

It was still raining. I dragged myself away from the window and opened my laptop. Even on maternity leave I logged in every day

to see what was going on at work. Ellie, our second daughter, had arrived safely and was exactly six weeks old. I felt vaguely like a super-mum having given birth with no epidural thanks to a few white lies from the midwives: 'You're only minutes away.' Yeah, right.

As I flicked through work emails a property newsletter popped up on the screen. It was filled with tantalising images of cottages in France... And a vineyard: it was the closest to perfect I had seen. The property matched our criteria: 25 acres of vines, a large house, a winery and equipment, and within our price range. In a frenzy of excitement I emailed Sean then read the description again. It seemed too good to be true. Patrick Joseph, the agent, answered my call. I explained the property we were interested in and asked for more details. He hesitated before extinguishing my excitement.

'I'm really sorry, it's been sold.'

Disappointment enveloped me like a wet blanket. He tried to sell me the other vineyard in the newsletter but it was way out of our price range. He could tell we were on a mission and wanted to help. I had to remind myself and him that if our dream ever was to succeed we had to keep to our financial reality. The phone rang again as I hung up and it was Sean.

I announced the bad news; we both knew that properties like this one were like hen's teeth. Through years of searching, the vineyards that matched what we wanted were always out of our price bracket. This was the first that looked right and that we could afford, but it was sold. I was gutted.

'It must have been a fake announcement to get people like us in contact. It probably didn't even exist,' I said bitterly.

'Maybe. We'll have to keep looking,' said Sean sagely. 'I've got to go.'

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That last phrase meant someone had arrived at Sean's desk. Our search was in stealth mode. We couldn't let on to his work that he was on a mission to completely change his life.

Trying to take my mind off the lost vineyard, I started unloading the dishwasher. Now was not the time anyway. Ellie was too young. It was a crazy idea. We had no experience working in a vineyard or winery. Sean's night wine classes were just theory. We had thought about taking a few weeks' leave to go and work on a vineyard but it hadn't worked out. A cry from the lounge stopped my internal debate. I grabbed a nappy, picked Ellie up, snuggled her tiny body close to mine, and climbed the stairs to the changing station.



A few weeks later there was a message on the answering machine.

'Caro, it's Patrick Joseph. That vineyard is back on the market. The buyer couldn't get a mortgage. You should move quickly, it will sell fast at this price.' Patrick was a Frenchman living in Nottingham. He helped people like us, with limited French, manage their way through the confusion of French property law.

I was thrilled and scared.

'Are we ready for this?' asked Sean when we spoke a few minutes later.

'I don't know, SF. It would be better if Ellie was older... but it seems so perfect.'

'We'll kick ourselves if we don't view it. I can't take another year in the rat race,' said Sean.

Sean left home before dawn and got back after dark. Investment management was stressful and city traffic hell. They were taking their toll. Sophia, now two years old, missed him. I did too,

especially at 5 p.m. with a toddler and a newborn to placate. This vineyard was the answer. We would pursue our passion and get away from the rat race... and the rain.

‘You’ll have to go on your own,’ I said. ‘We won’t get a passport for Ellie fast enough for me to go. Even if it doesn’t work out it will be good for our research.’

Research was a good word to keep the property at arm’s length. Sean booked his flight.



With absolutely no experience in vineyards and winemaking we needed someone to help us assess the property. An Internet search offered up the agricultural organisation Société d’Aménagement Foncier et d’Établissement Rural, or SAFER. They looked like the experts we needed.

To call them I had to use my French, which, for all my lessons, was pitiful. I had done a few years of basic French at school then a few years of night classes with the Alliance Française. I wrote down what I wanted to say and made the call. A woman answered and my brain froze. I stammered out the first sentence on the page in front of me.

*‘Je ne parle pas beaucoup français. Parlez très lentement s’il vous plaît.’*

After several repeats of words that made no sense to me I realised Madame was saying someone would call me back. My investment in night classes was not delivering what I hoped.

A Monsieur Dupont called at 7 a.m. the next morning from something called La Sa Furr. I assumed he had the wrong number and was about to hang up when it dawned on me that this was the pronunciation of SAFER. No wonder I’d been confused the day

before. With Ellie latched onto my breast and Sophia jammed into the high chair, I rolled out my ‘please speak very slowly’ again and tried to concentrate. After spelling his name three times and repeating his phone number ad infinitum, I could tell his patience was wearing thin. A five-minute discussion about what *quinze heures* meant drained what little of it remained but I had a rendezvous between him and Sean at what I hoped was 3 p.m. the following day at the vineyard.

Sean left for Bordeaux. While on the outside I calmly went through my daily routine, inside, my mind was racing. At last, the phone rang.

‘*C’est Jean.*’ He had already changed his name to the French version.

‘Tell all.’ I was so excited I couldn’t keep still. I paced and Sophia toddled round the room after me while Ellie, lying in a bouncy chair on the floor, looked on bemused.

‘It’s been some afternoon,’ said Sean. ‘When Monsieur Dupont arrived, the sellers looked rattled, then he announced that the place is in liquidation. The French agent didn’t even know. Sweet divine. Lucky you phoned SAFER. But *bellissima*, it’s beautiful, Carolinus.’

Beautiful was one thing, liquidation was another. The French agent was from the local property agency that had the property on their books. Patrick was a go-between for us, offering help and advice, particularly on the legal aspects of the transaction. It was looking like we were really going to need him.

‘We don’t want to get into a complicated transaction. We’ve seen how badly things can go wrong buying property in France,’ I said. We had been avid viewers of *No Going Back* and similar shows.

‘We won’t make an offer until we’ve done our homework,’ he said reassuringly. ‘The house is in bad shape. We’ll have to learn to renovate.’

Liquidation, a ruin of a house; perhaps this wasn’t it after all. We had never done more than a coat of paint between us. Part of me was in denial and another part desperately wanted this property to be the one. We had been dreaming of this for so long.

‘Patrick gave me the name this morning: Château Haut Garrigue. It’s near Bergerac in the Dordogne, an hour east of Bordeaux.’

I had never been to the Dordogne.

‘The house has incredible views,’ continued Sean. ‘You can see Bergerac cathedral, twenty kilometres away. Saussignac village is five minutes’ walk through the vineyards. It has a primary school and a restaurant.’

‘The girls could walk to school,’ I said. ‘We wouldn’t even have to commute for the school run.’ This property was looking more attractive. ‘What about the land?’

‘Apart from the vineyards it has peach, hazelnut, cherry and fig trees.’

‘It was made for us, SF!’ I shouted. I love figs.

‘Calm down, Carolinus! The place is totally rundown. The figs are nice to have for personal consumption. I don’t know... it needs a lot of investment.’

‘What about the vineyard? How much money do they make?’

‘They sell everything in bulk to a *négociant*. Based on the numbers they gave me they gross about twenty thousand a year. If that’s true, after costs, they make nothing with two of them working full-time.’

A *négociant* buys wine in bulk then blends it with other wines and bottles it for sale. We knew they paid low prices for wine but

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this income sounded wrong, far too low. We had to be missing a zero. We agreed that Sean had misheard and moved on, ignoring the harsh reality of the wine crisis.

‘And the winery?’

‘The winery needs investment.’

We avoided discussing where this ‘investment’ was going to come from. Based on rough calculations, with the money from selling our house, after paying off the mortgage, we’d have just enough to buy this property. We’d be throwing everything we had into it and there wouldn’t be any left over for renovation or ‘investment’. There was a long pause where both our minds churned silently over the financial elements.

‘Did you taste the wines?’ I asked.

‘The sauvignon blanc and the red. They’re surprisingly good given the state of the place. The vineyard slopes are steep and well drained. Monsieur Dupont says it’s a good vineyard but it needs renovation. The soil is similar to what we saw on the grand crus classés plateau and slopes in St Émilion; clay and limestone. I think it can produce great wines.’

That was it: great wines. Our dream was more than a vineyard, it was creating great wines. I went to bed but couldn’t sleep. My body tossed and my mind thrashed in all directions. It was what we wanted and I was excited but the prospective upheaval was immense. The mere logistics of making the move were turning me into an insomniac; the idea of what we would do when we got to that foreign land and had to create our wine was beyond me.



When Sean got home we spent an exhilarating afternoon arguing the pros and cons of Château Haut Garrigue. That evening he

presented me with a bottle of vintage 2000 red from the vineyard. He poured tasting amounts into our Riedel glasses.

Riedel makes what some believe are the finest lead crystal wine glasses. They are crafted to bring out the best in wine through their shape and design. We thought Riedels were only for wine snobs, then our closest friends gave us a pair for Christmas. Drinking wine from them was like listening to a symphony on a serious sound system compared to a portable CD player.

I took the glass from Sean and lifted the mahogany liquid to my nose, inhaling a melody of dark fruit with a clean mineral streak through the centre. Desire drew me forward and I tilted the glass to my lips.

‘Hang on,’ said Sean. ‘What did you get on the nose?’

Sean wanted analysis. I wanted to drink. ‘Blackberry,’ I said, eager to get on with my first swig.

‘What else?’

‘Mineral.’

‘OK, now you can taste.’

I took a deep draught and swirled it around, feeling the warming sensation of alcohol on the back of my throat. The wine filled my mouth with plum and blackberry. The finish had a hint of spice and that attractive saline minerality.

‘Delicious.’ I licked my lips. The wine filled me with joy. A picture of a vineyard drenched in sunlight formed in my mind. Sean drew me rudely back to the lounge of our semi-d.

‘Did you get the spice?’

I nodded.

‘It’s probably the oak, the wine was barrel-aged.’

‘How can they be in liquidation if they make wine this good?’ I asked.

‘I got the impression they have bigger problems than their finances. Maybe their subsequent vintages weren’t this good.’



We found a Bergerac-based *notaire* who was described as a specialist in vineyards and liquidations. The combination sounded ominous but was exactly what we needed.

A *notaire* is an all-powerful state lawyer who does not litigate but rather deals with property, commercial and inheritance law. He assured us that we would be protected from the current owner’s debts if we bought the property, rather than their business. It was excellent news. Now we could seriously consider buying the property. Then he outlined the process for buying a property in liquidation.

It was complicated. We would be buying the land and house from the owners, the equipment and stock from the liquidator and negotiating the possibility of all of this through the French government agency SAFER. SAFER and the liquidator would consider multiple offers before making a decision on who to sell to. There would be multiple decision makers. I still didn’t fully understand the process but at least I knew we weren’t putting ourselves at risk to the previous owner’s debts.

This wasn’t just a purchase for us; it was a massive life decision. To buy the property we had to sell our house. There was no halfway.

‘What are we going to do, SF?’ I asked as we debated the purchase that evening.

Sean had been playing it cool. He didn’t want me to feel influenced but I knew what he wanted. For me, the quality of the

wine had sealed it. Now that we knew the liquidation was not a problem it was obvious we should make an offer.

Patrick, the agent, called the next day before I had a chance to call him. Although I had only spoken to him a few times he felt like a confidante; he knew more about our dream than our closest family and friends.

‘A person who viewed the place after Sean has offered the full price,’ he said. ‘What do you want to do?’

This put a new aspect of risk on the purchase. It was not as simple as our decision to go ahead or not. There was no certainty that it would be ours. Over the previous few days I had slowly been making this vineyard my new home.

Patrick was convinced a slightly higher price would clinch the deal so we agreed. Minutes later he confirmed the seller had accepted our bid. I flew up onto cloud nine, revelling in my sun-drenched vineyard image. Sophia, rolling around on her Winnie the Pooh car, and Ellie, lying in the bouncy chair, both looked up at my yell of triumph. When Sean got home we toasted our new venture with butterflies of excitement and fear intertwined with the fine bubbles of the champagne. It seemed like it was really happening... I had already forgotten that the *notaire* had said it was not only the seller’s decision.

The following evening Patrick shattered our dream.

‘Caro, you won’t believe this, but everything’s off. In French law, once the asking price has been accepted on a place it’s closed to other bids so they can’t take your offer even though they want to. Gazumping isn’t allowed.’

I had spent a week setting my sights on this property as our new home, the place to settle for good, and now we couldn’t even bid. My vineyard vision fizzled away like a sparkler doused in water. I felt aggressive.

‘The *notaire* said the liquidator would consider multiple offers,’ I snapped.

‘Sorry, Caro, this is what the agent in France told me. This is a bit different to a standard sale. I’ll query it and get back to you as soon as I can. In the meantime, consider everything on stop.’

Sometimes Patrick’s French came through in the English he used, like saying everything is on ‘stop’. If he didn’t know what was going on, what hope was there for us?

‘Don’t worry, Carolinus,’ soothed Sean in his frustratingly calm manner when I called him with the latest twist. ‘There will be other places.’

‘But will they be as perfect? Walking distance to a school, views, the right grape varieties?’ I could see our dream slipping away.

We were in limbo. The combination of the anxiety about the vineyard and broken nights created by a newborn guaranteed insomnia. I called Jacky, our pharmacist, to ask for sleeping pills I could take while breastfeeding. She sent me a homeopathic lifesaver that arrived the morning Patrick called back.

‘Caro, you were right. You can make an offer. It’s all on again.’

I was beginning to understand that in France, nothing was a straight line, neither the walls of our potential new home nor the negotiations to get there.

‘So what do we need to do?’

Patrick started with a long ‘Well’ in his signature Gallic style. ‘You need to send in a signed *promesse d’achat* and a business plan laying out all the details: finance, experience, strategy and anything else you feel will make your proposition a viable one. It should be in French and they need it by Monday.’

In my sleep-deprived state this sounded insurmountable; my French wasn’t good enough to write a business document. I felt like crying.

‘Why do they need all of that? They should only be interested in whether we can pay.’

‘Usually, yes, but this is an agricultural property in liquidation so the mandatory liquidator will look at all the angles. He will compare the price offered, financing and viability before choosing the buyer. It could take a few weeks. I’ll check over the French for you.’

Patrick had read my mind. Sean and I spent the weekend discussing the costs and potential revenues. We knew horrifyingly little of what we needed. The Internet was a great source of information but how realistic American state extension office vineyard costs and revenues were for France was anybody’s guess. By the end of the weekend we knew that this venture was a massive risk. It would be hard to make ends meet. We should have stopped right there but our journey had already taken us beyond the bounds of logic.

I contacted an accountant who specialised in vineyards for a sense check on our plan. He increased many of our costs but thought the revenue seemed reasonable. We submitted our plan and signed offer.

The next week flew by in a blur as we prepared to sell our house. In two weeks the nebulous idea of changing our lives had become high-definition reality and homeopathic sleeping pills had become my best friend.



Sean arranged to go to France for a two-week intensive French course. If this property came through he would need some language skills *tout de suite*. The day he left I went to the O’Briens’, our closest friends, for lunch. This was the first time I’d been able to talk to them about our move. I was excited but nervous.

‘What? You’re buying it without seeing it?’ asked Aideen as she served up a portion of roast chicken, our regular Sunday treat and Sophia’s favourite. Aideen was my best friend and had been a rock for me through Sophia’s first year. A professional coach in a technology company by day and a breastfeeding consultant by night, Aideen had supported me with the difficult circumstances of breastfeeding a newborn recovering from life-critical surgery, which in itself helped me cope emotionally, offering me a concrete way to contribute to Sophia’s recovery.

‘We had to make the decision. I couldn’t go without Ellie and she didn’t have a passport. It all happened so quickly. We still don’t have a firm answer on the property but we’ve decided to sell the house anyway. If it doesn’t come through we’ll find another one. We’ve decided this is the right thing for us.’

‘I’m gobsmacked.’

We hadn’t told anyone about our plans. We worked in a tight-knit technology and finance community and had decided that our careers would be seriously impaired if there was any inkling of our move. Until we were sure that it was going ahead we wouldn’t say a word to anyone, not even our closest friends and family.

‘The “for sale” sign goes up tomorrow so I have to talk to all our neighbours this afternoon.’

The finality of what we were doing hit me.

‘It’s so sudden,’ she said.

I couldn’t have said it better myself. Though we had been thinking about this dream for more than a decade, now it was happening too fast. Tears welled up. I would miss Aideen.

We spent hours talking over lunch then over a long walk through the park. By the time Aideen and Barry invited us to stay on for a light supper they were as excited about our move as I was. They

had had an inkling of our ‘back to the land’ dream but just like ourselves had no idea how far we were willing to take it. Two weeks before if someone had asked me if we were really going to pursue this crazy dream I would have said ‘unlikely’. Something had clicked.

I felt torn; part of me was thrilled and wanted to go, the other part was terrified, and wanted to stay. We would be leaving our friends. We would be leaving successful careers and their associated income. I would be changing from a responsible job that had me networking with famous entrepreneurs and analysing leading-edge technology to looking after kids full-time in rural France.

When I got home there was a message on the answering machine.

‘Hi Caro and Sean, it’s Patrick. The sellers have decided to take your offer but they want to know how quickly you can proceed.’

I felt elated, then went into a state of panic. My mind flooded with what we would have to do in the coming weeks and my adrenaline sky-rocketed. It was too late to call him back. Sean rang from Paris in time to stop me spinning completely out of control.

‘Calm down, Carolinus. You can call Patrick in the morning. It is Sunday, after all. Take a deep breath. It’s good news but nothing is sure until we have a signed agreement. Take your sleeping pills and get some rest.’

Between getting up to feed Ellie and thinking about what Patrick’s message meant for us, I slept little in spite of the pills. In the morning our agent assured me we would have our house sold in two weeks. I called Patrick, expecting it to be the final call in this long negotiation process.

‘You won’t believe this,’ he said, ‘the seller just called and they have accepted another offer. A third party offered three thousand

more than you, they are taking the offer and they don't want a counter offer from you. They don't want a price war.'

I felt like a jilted lover. After putting our hearts and souls into the business plan it was even more personal. We had shared our dream with the decision makers. 'What can we do?' I said eventually.

'Nothing right now. I told them you would match the offer but they were adamant they didn't want to hear it. We're going to try to influence the decision through the mandatory liquidator and SAFER. The other party is a retired couple who want it for a holiday house and will sell off the vines.'

I didn't need any more information, I hated them already. They were stealing our dream to turn it into a retirement house. I felt like vomiting.

'Patrick, we can't go much higher. The place needs a lot of work. You saw the architect's estimate: €50,000 to make the house liveable. There's serious investment required in the vineyard and winery. One minute we have the property, the next minute we don't. One day it's the mandatory liquidator making the decision, the next it's the owners; one day they can't take a gazumping offer, the next they can. The uncertainty is killing me. I am not sure how much more of this I can take.'

'I know, Caro. This is a very difficult transaction but the property is a great buy. If this doesn't work then I think it will be time to walk away.'

I hung up feeling nauseous and texted Sean. For the sellers to refuse more money when they were in financial trouble didn't make sense. Ellie gave me a huge smile and latched onto my breast, blissfully oblivious to the turmoil in our lives.



## Chapter 2

# Goodbye Pay Cheques, Hello Château

‘Good morning, Caro. How are you today?’ said Patrick chirpily. ‘The other offer has gone away and the seller wants to accept your initial offer.’

‘What happened?’ I asked, feeling a cautious prickle of elation.

‘Well, the offer was never formalised. Perhaps there was persuasion by Sa Furr. Our agent will get a *promesse de vente* signed by the seller this afternoon so that they can’t change their minds again.’

I texted Sean then tried to contact the *notaire*. After calling seven times I spoke to him. He assured me our verbal offer was accepted and he would call me back later in the day to arrange a formal signing. It looked like it was really going to happen.

I caught Sean on a break from his French class and filled him in on the final episode of our limbo nightmare, ending with the *notaire* who still had not called me back to arrange the formal signing.

‘I am sure this *notaire* is doing something funny. Maybe his brother is trying to buy the vineyard.’

Sean laughed and told me I was paranoid then went back to the calm of his class. By the evening, the import of the acceptance had sunk in and I felt like I had jumped out of a plane without a parachute.

Fortunately a safety net was developing: the bidding on the house we were selling went beyond our agent’s estimate. We closed the sale with a critical boost to our budget. We knew from reading about moves to France that the rule of thumb was to double your renovation estimate. We would learn that even this was not enough.

At last we could talk about our move. In jubilation, I called an old friend in Oxford.

‘Saucy Jack?’ said Mike.

‘Not Saucy Jack. Saussignac. It’s famous for its wines. Haven’t you heard of it?’

‘No. We’ll have to come and try it.’

No one had heard of the wine appellations Saussignac and Bergerac but it was too late to change our minds. A signed copy of the contract to purchase arrived. It was accompanied by a letter stating that a previous owner, Monsieur Battistella, was due 200 litres of our wine every year. There were two sales of the property separating us and him. We debated contesting it but decided Monsieur Battistella might prove a useful ally. We didn’t want to land up like Jean in *Jean de Florette*; thwarted at every step by the locals. We were foreigners planning to settle in rural France and take on a *métier* that was an icon of France. It could spell trouble.

I felt like I was in a dream and would wake up at any moment. This was not what a normal person like me did. It was far too risky, it was not rational, but it was also intoxicatingly exciting.

We moved out of our home. The sale had proceeded even faster than the agent forecast. Ellie slept and Sophia watched packing operations while Sean and I cleaned cupboards.

‘Don’t take my chair!’ yelled Sophia as her high chair disappeared into the back of the van.

Before I could explain, she spied her polar bear going the same way and shouted: ‘They’re putting Floppy on the truck!’ I promised we would see the chair and Floppy at our new house in France in a few weeks.

Sophia was a very composed young lady. I explained what we were doing again and she nodded sagely. We had already talked about the move but she had no frame of reference for it. She was only two and had never known anything but that house. It was our first real home, where both our daughters were born, the place where we felt truly settled for the first time in our married lives. She knew something big was up.

Sean and I tried not to look too far ahead, focusing on moving to our rental house that would be our home for four weeks while we worked out our notice at our respective jobs, participated in numerous planned farewells with work and friends and held Ellie’s christening. Although everything was official with the vineyard purchase, we had read that nothing was certain until the final transaction went through, at which point we would be installed in France with no turning back. A few hours later the moving truck, jam-packed with our belongings, pulled away from the driveway and we locked our house for the last time. We were leaving our friends and familiar comforts. We drove to our furnished weekly

rental armed with survival rations of clothes, baby equipment and paperwork. I choked back my sobs. I didn't want to upset the girls but a river of sadness flowed over me. I swallowed hard.

That evening Sophia looked worried.

'We forgot my sandpit,' she said, large tears forming in her eyes.

I assured her it would be delivered to us in France. She looked doubtful. Thinking it would give her something concrete about where we were going, I showed her an ancient map that included our vineyard, Château Haut Garrigue. Then we looked up the meaning of '*garrigue*': herbal scrubland populated with lavender, thyme, rosemary and scrub oak; commonly found in Provence. In old French it also meant chalky hill which must have been the origin of the name since our new home was five hours' drive from Provence.

The weeks of farewell parties and tying up loose ends flew by. Colleagues and friends were incredulous. Our GP said, 'You're brave... or mad... or both.' An accounting friend said, 'That's risk with a capital "R".' Both were right. The excitement was mounting but so was the stress. On the eve of our move to France, Sean ignored me, drank too much and watched television instead of packing.

'How can you watch TV when we are making the most important move of our lives?' I yelled. I had been packing and cleaning non-stop for what seemed like days. 'There is still a mountain to pack!'

'It's my life. If I want to watch this film I will,' he said, turning back to the TV.

'It's not only your life,' I screamed. 'It's all our lives. We're moving country in a few hours.'

It ignited one of the severest fights we had ever had. We yelled stinging insults at each other until Sean said dismissively, 'Just go

to bed.' I decided to bow out before things turned even more nasty. Sean continued to watch his movie and I stomped upstairs to check on Ellie and Sophia.

Was this the way Sean would handle our new life? How could we possibly get through our first harvest if we couldn't keep our heads while packing our cases?

Sean was the love of my life. I had known from the moment we met fifteen years before. Back then, he was a handsome journalist covering the momentous political change in South Africa. Creative and tall, with long, blonde, wavy hair, he was my ideal man. I was besotted. He took me to parts of Johannesburg I had never heard of, to jive to African reggae in colourful rooms thick with marijuana and hope. He helped me to see life through a wider lens. He never accepted the status quo.

Sean was happier as a journalist than as the financial writer he had been for the last eight years. He had committed himself to it and succeeded, acquiring the coveted and gruelling certified financial analyst title. In the last year, along with a full-time job and a very young family, he held down a second part-time job lecturing to Masters in Finance students in the evenings at a local university. It had meant more pressure and less time at home but it added to our savings and helped realise our dream – that was rapidly turning into a nightmare...

The girls were sleeping peacefully despite our screaming match. I got into bed exhausted and switched off the light. My mind continued to churn. If this move was going to jeopardise our relationship, I did not want to go through with it. Sean was more important to me than following this dream.

But it was too late. The high-pitched beep of our alarm clock exploded through my brain and I scrambled to switch it off. In a few hours we would be on French soil.

Still smarting from our fight I jabbed Sean aggressively in the ribs then went downstairs to brew strong tea. The kitchen was pristine and everything was packed. Sean must have stayed up almost all night after his film ended. I felt contrite.

Soon we were staring blearily over mountains of luggage at a timid dawn through a taxi window. Sophia and Ellie looked remarkably wide-eyed, despite our best attempts to keep them asleep. As we passed familiar streets filled with memories from almost a decade of our life, tears welled up in my eyes.

We arrived at the airline counter with our two-storey trolley of luggage. The airline representative looked at us with mild amusement and I muttered something about moving country. Her eyes flicked over the stratospheric total on the scale and she handed us our boarding cards. She hadn't charged a cent for excess. Soon we were in France, navigating our luggage mountain out of Bordeaux airport.

'I think we should go straight to Haut Garrigue,' said Sean.

'I want to go to the B&B. We'll see it in a few days,' I replied.

I had booked a B&B on a local vineyard that was a few kilometres from Haut Garrigue. It looked authentic and clean but most importantly I hoped that staying with winegrowers meant we could learn something.

'But it's on the route.'

Sean was naturally desperate to show me our new abode. But I was in denial. I wanted to go home.

I was scared. I didn't want to be disappointed. By the time we reached the Bergerac exit on the Bordeaux ring road, thanks to Sean's persuasion and my own curiosity I capitulated. Before long we were climbing the hill into Saussignac. It was a postcard-perfect French village with a magnificent château looking onto

the main *place*, or square, with a restaurant on the opposite side and a second square with a small park, post office, bread shop and church. A few houses later we passed the school and a few vineyards and took a well-worn road past the cemetery and three new-looking houses. Then Château Haut Garrigue was in front of us. No warning, no avenue of trees, no signs, just a bunch of dishevelled buildings at the end of a short, bumpy dirt road.

The owners' dogs thrashed around the car. There was broken equipment lying around the yard. The house looked worse than the photos had promised. The shutters were eaten away by rot and termites.

We got out of the car and were offered a tour of the property. The fence around the 3-metre-high terrace was rusted away, making it a deathtrap for children. The place was thoroughly rundown. I looked at the date, 1737, etched above the cellar and thought 'Oh my God, what have we done?' then swallowed back a wave of tears and tried to concentrate on the view. The natural splendour of the valley sprawling below, decked out in the bright greens of summer, was breathtaking.

The owner continued the tour inside. It was beyond a nightmare. The main house was filthy. The renovation required was terrifying. The potential of the place, with its views and deep history, was clear, but the prospect of living in it with Ellie a mere five months old filled me with horror. After the visit we sat at the outdoor table to talk through the final details for the property transaction that was due to take place the following week. The dogs rollicked over to Ellie's buggy and slavered on her tiny hands. I grabbed a wipe and cleaned them before she could put them into her mouth. On my way into the kitchen to throw away the wipe, I saw a pack of gastroenteritis dog medicine on the table. I sprinted back out

and lifted Ellie from her pram well out of the dogs' reach, wiping her hands frantically. We couldn't risk Ellie's health another second.

I made an excuse about needing to feed the kids and strapped Ellie into her car seat, motioning to Sean to leave urgently. 'Sweet divine, it's much more rundown and dirty than I recall from my visit,' said Sean as we took off.

'I liked the doggies,' said Sophia.

I filled Sean in on the gastroenteritis tablets I had seen, a small ball of angst for Ellie forming in my stomach. It was clear to both of us that the first priority once we moved in was cleaning and disinfecting the house.

As we drove to the B&B that would be our home for ten days as we waited for the property transaction to complete we discussed plans for the coming weeks. Despite the horrors we'd seen we were remarkably upbeat. While the filth and renovation were more daunting than I imagined, the natural beauty, views and history of the property created magic that far exceeded my expectations. We were embarking on the adventure of our lives and we were both excited.

The B&B was run by a family who had a vineyard the same size as the one we were about to purchase. We arrived at our apartment on their farm and found it to be the perfect antidote: spotless and with everything we needed including delightful toys for Sophia. She was developing a nurturing instinct and took great pleasure in looking after the baby dolls complete with accessories – cots, pushchairs, baby bath and clothes.

When we sat down to dinner that night with our hosts, Bernard and Myriam Barse and their teenage daughter Élodie, I explained in halting French why we were there.

'We are buying Château Haut Garrigue in Saussignac. The purchase goes through next week so we are staying here while

we wait for that to happen. We left our city jobs and moved country today. We saw on the website that you have twenty-five acres like we will have so we thought it would be useful to stay with you to hear what it is like.'

Their eyes popped out on stilts.

'*C'est très dur,*' (It's very hard) said Bernard.

Myriam could not believe that we had chosen to swap the comforts of city life for the tough life of winegrowing. She explained that they both had day jobs off the vineyard, Bernard as an electrician and she as a teacher's aide at the local *école maternelle*, to make ends meet.

Bernard, a quiet, compact man, considered our story a little longer then added: 'Prudence. You must be very careful. Costs are high and sales are difficult.'

He was a man of few words and not given to offering advice lightly. Perhaps our financial plan wasn't a reflection of reality.

Four delicious courses ensued, helping to remind us why we were here: baguette and *rillettes de canard*, a local delicacy of cold shredded duck in its fat, matched with the Barse's Saussignac dessert wine; lamb chops from their own herd of sheep, cooked to perfection with rosemary and matched with their red; then home-grown green salad with a selection of fine *fromage*, finished off with a home-made fruit compote. It was a local feast *extraordinaire*.

'Would you like anything else?' asked Myriam as we finished.

'No thank you, that was delicious, *je suis pleine,*' I replied, using the only French words for 'I have had enough' that I could think of.

Élodie, the Barse's teenage daughter, almost fell off her chair laughing.

Myriam giggled politely. ‘Used like this, “*Je suis pleine*” means “I am drunk”’, she explained.

That evening Sean and I sat outside our apartment enjoying the warm evening air once the girls had fallen asleep. The first major step had been taken: we had moved country. The fight we had the night before was a result of stress and fatigue and while we were still raw from it we had begun to forgive each other. If we were going to take on the challenges that the Barse had indicated were to come, our relationship had to be strong.

This move was a chance to put down roots and to pursue our passion together. Since meeting in Johannesburg we had lived in Vancouver, Cape Town and Dublin and worked even further afield. Our longest sojourn so far had been Dublin and with our ancestry – we grew up in South Africa but Sean’s grandparents were Irish and my great grandmother too – we had felt very at home there... but there were no vineyards.

I made a list of what we needed to do over the next few days. We drifted onto our dreams for our new life and our vineyard, our fight almost erased from our memories. I would have stayed up later had I not known I would be woken to breastfeed Ellie within a few hours.



The next day, warned by Myriam and Bernard, but undaunted, we tackled the practicalities of setting up our new life: getting an operational bank account; registering Sophia with a local *école maternelle*, the pre-primary school; buying supplies and purchasing the necessary furniture and equipment to survive at Haut Garrigue while we waited for our belongings to arrive. The heat was extreme. Sean found me sobbing in the supermarket car

park. A few minutes at 44 degrees and I was in meltdown. Little wonder. Back home a heatwave was anything over 24 degrees.

Ellie got her first tooth complete with vomiting and fevers. Our apartment didn't have a washing machine so Myriam offered me the use of theirs. In the evenings when the temperature eased we revelled in the warmth, sitting at our outdoor table eating picnics and waving at Bernard's ancient uncle feeding their sheep. Each day we got another brick of our new lives in place. On our moving-in day Myriam kindly offered to take Sophia, Ellie and me to our new home while Sean collected newly purchased furniture from Bergerac. We had formed a bond over the ten days, discovering that they had had a similar experience when Élodie was born to the one we had with Sophia. They were generous and big-hearted.

Myriam loaded us up with gifts, hand-me-down toys for Sophia and bottles of fig jam. We arrived at Château Haut Garrigue and hauled our luggage inside.

*'Bon courage,'* called Myriam as she left. I felt mine fail.

The dark, shuttered house didn't feel like home. It felt empty and rundown. There was dirt everywhere. The shower hadn't been cleaned in decades. It had black fungus centimetres deep down the back corners and up the sides. Opening the shutters to let in the sun and air helped immediately. Ellie, settled in her bouncy chair, watched Sophia buzz around settling her baby dolls from Myriam into their new place.

I started cleaning the kitchen. The sink had brown gunk ingrained into the supposedly stainless steel. After an hour the sink was stainless and I was feeling better. The view out of the kitchen window offered much needed succour, raised as it was above vineyards plunging down towards the Dordogne valley: a picture postcard of green vines, golden sunlight and a village in

the distance with a classic French church spire and beautiful tones of local stone. Just as the dirt was starting to drag me down, my hero, Sean, looking like a happy cowboy in his leather Stetson, drove into the courtyard in a large truck hired for the half-day. We heaved our newly acquired double bed, fridge-freezer, washing machine and dishwasher inside and Sean left to return the truck. An hour later he was back installing the equipment.

By the end of our first day we were exhausted but we had a makeshift table and chairs, beds made with fresh linen, cupboards clean enough for our new crockery and a working washing machine, dishwasher and fridge. Sophia fell asleep instantly but Ellie, despite my efforts with her new travel cot, would not settle. She had been sleeping in her bouncy chair instead of a cot since this life-changing purchase started. I moved her into the chair and her little leg started kicking, offering her the soothing bounce that helped ease the tumultuous change. Minutes later she was asleep.

Relieved, Sean and I sat down and drank a toast to our new home with a bottle of our Château Haut Garrigue red. It tasted great. Thank God, since we'd bought 4,000 bottles of it with the property.

We had done it. Tired as we were, we took a few moments to soak in the atmosphere of the 300-year-old room with its enormous beams and metre-thick walls, to appreciate the silence of our new surroundings, and to enjoy a selection of fine cheeses that were becoming a daily habit. Creamy Camembert, nutty Comté and salty Bleu d'Auvergne with slices of apple tasted like heaven. Through the window the light of the moon highlighted the contours of the vines, reminding us why we were here. An owl hooted in the barn across the courtyard. Our city life felt a world away, although it was only ten days since we left.

I fell asleep as my head hit the pillow. At three that morning I woke to the lashing rain of a summer storm and found Sean running around the kitchen placing pots and potties in strategic places. Our one-day-old home was a leaking ship.



The next morning droppings in Ellie's pram confirmed a mouse infestation. We soon realised they were everywhere, eating our food and Ellie's milk-stained clothes in the washing bag. My days became consumed with the Mouse War. I opened the bin and they leapt out at me, bungee-jumping over the edge. They woke us at night. Each time a grey blur streaked across the floor I jumped three feet in the air and screamed. I couldn't bring myself to pick up a dead one let alone deal with a live one; so much for a less stressful life.

At first we encouraged them to leave with expensive sonic devices. When it became clear that they would not take the hint we moved on to other methods. As the week progressed we deployed mousetraps, rat traps and mouse 'chocolate', a supposedly irresistible but lethal mouse snack, carefully placed behind skirting boards where we were sure that Sophia could not get them. In between trips to France Telecom to try to get our phone connected I bought all the mouse-killing devices I could find. My French was improving as fast as my blood pressure was rising. France Telecom wouldn't connect us because the previous owners didn't officially disconnect their phone line.

As a counterbalance to these stresses of our new life I found chocolate in the supermarket which offered *une touche de sérénité*, a touch of serenity. This dark chocolate, filled with bits of cherry, promised to aid the fight against daily stress thanks to high levels

of magnesium. Two 100-gram slabs were all that was required for my daily dose.

For more healthy fare I discovered the Gardonne market 4 kilometres away, its stalls groaning with vegetables and fruit, farm-raised chickens and more. I relished the seasonal produce, loading up on the bounty of late summer: punnets of plump tomatoes dressed with large sprigs of basil, myriad different lettuces from purple and smooth to bright green and frizzy, ruby plums and early apples. There was something therapeutic about shopping there, enjoying the banter between stallholders and the care they took with finding exactly what I was looking for.

Fortunately the two girls were taking the mice and the move in their stride and I wasn't even sharing my cherry delight with them. Sophia started school two days after we moved in. She walked confidently into the classroom, delighted to find her name above a coat hook especially for her. Despite speaking no French she settled in remarkably smoothly. The smooth entry was not to last. On the fourth day, as we arrived at school, she started sobbing inconsolably but bravely went into the classroom despite tears pouring down her little cheeks. I choked back my tears as I got back into the car, anxious not to upset Ellie who was strapped into her car seat in the back. Sophia was a courageous little character. Given the start she had it was no wonder.

That night, worrying about her having too much change to cope with at such a young age, I overdosed on stress-buster chocolate. Still bleary-eyed from my bad night, I took her to school the next day expecting another difficult morning. As we arrived, a brave voice in the back of the car declared, 'I am not going to cry today.'

Sophia was handling a new country, new language and school for the first time in her life while I wasn't coping with a mouldy

shower, mice and a leaking roof. At least the roof was about to be fixed.

*‘Quelle vue,’* (What a view) said the roofer, looking over the terrace that wrapped around most of the house. The late summer sun glowed down on the hillside, highlighting the contours of the vine rows. The Dordogne River, meandering towards Bordeaux, twinkled in the distance.

He climbed the ladder and ranged across the roof like a mountain goat while we waited anxiously below. After pushing a few tiles into position he leapt expertly off the ladder.

‘It’s fixed. You need to realign the tiles when they get out of line.’ He quickly showed Sean how to do it and wouldn’t take any payment. ‘It will need to be completely renovated in time. You can probably get away with it like this for another couple of years,’ he added as he left.

It was a gesture of unexpected generosity that left me grateful and humble but I couldn’t help my mind racing ahead to consider the costs required in a year or two. Through my roof-budgeting haze I heard Sophia shouting, ‘Ellie’s got that! Ellie’s got that!’ I ran to find Ellie chewing on the toilet-cleaning brush. I was failing as a mother. I couldn’t find my way to the supermarket without getting lost, opening a tin of paint was a serious challenge and I missed my work and my friends. I said a prayer asking God to protect Ellie from the germs of the toilet bowl, moved the toilet brush out of her reach and told myself to get a grip.

Some small but significant successes helped me do that. Two weeks of constant harassing brought France Telecom to their senses and they agreed to connect our phone line based on a certificate of residence provided by our mayor. Having a telephone and access to the Internet was like stepping out of the dark ages.

## GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

The mice were proving more stubborn. I was on the brink of moving out when they met their match. The local one-man hardware store sold the world's most sensitive mousetraps. At 95 cents each they were the cheapest remedy so far and they took the entire hoard of rodents down. Sean was my hero. He valiantly removed the dead bodies as they succumbed, mouse by mouse. I almost missed them once they were gone. With these time-consuming challenges solved we turned our attention to the renovations and the farm.



## Chapter 3

# Homesick

I wanted the glamorous part of owning a vineyard, not the hard work. Sean was to do the vineyard work and I would look after the kids, do light renovation and eventually the marketing. At the time there was little that could be called glamorous in what we had purchased save perhaps the view.

What we had bought was a large old house that had originally been two houses, numerous ragged outbuildings including the fermentation winery or *pressoir*, the storage winery and a very large barn, and a chunk of about 30 acres of surrounding land of which 25 acres were vineyards in different stages of disrepair. One small part of the house was liveable: a large bedroom where we had installed our entire family, a kitchen where we had a makeshift set-up that included our new equipment and a very old hob, and a large bathroom that once thoroughly cleaned was passable but miles from glamorous. Looking after a very young family in a kitchen that rated just above camping was a full-time job. The gas hob had two working plates and we had no oven. We were scared stiff of spending any more money.

## GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

The winery and its renovation were on the long finger – we might have to put them off for a while. It would be a year before we turned our attention to our first harvest and it seemed far, far away. Just coping with daily life in this new environment was enough; my mind could not take in the idea of making our own wine.

Decades of garbage had to be removed from Château Haut Garrigue: fridges and ovens that didn't work, beds that hadn't been used in generations and mounds of unidentifiable detritus. Soon the dreadlocked young man at the dump was greeting me like a friend.

We lived in one large room together while we worked on our first project – a bedroom for the girls. It was lightweight renovation, decorative rather than structural, and meant we would at last get a bit of parental privacy. It had a dirty neon light and walls covered with brown, flowery wallpaper that was peeling badly and stained dark yellow with nicotine. The window in the corner was black with mould. Below it were several fist-size holes that had been the main entrance for our late friends, the mice. The concrete floor was covered with filthy linoleum curling up at the edges like old tobacco. The door had several large vertical cracks running down the upper half and didn't close. We started by removing the linoleum. Once we had cleared the room I tackled the wallpaper while Sean took on the window. I steamed and scraped until my arms ached. Drops of boiling water, molten nicotine and soggy paper fell incessantly onto my arms and hair. I geared up in waterproofs with goggles and hood regardless of the heat. The wallpaper was beyond tenacious. An Internet search affirmed that what we had was not normal. Clearly something more serious than standard wallpaper glue had been used to attach it.

Weeks later, my arms were toned but the room was still in an awful state. I was more at home with a keyboard than a screwdriver and found myself a reluctant renovator.

‘We’re getting nowhere, SE,’ I said, bursting into tears. Completing this room alone before Sean started pruning the vineyard was looking unlikely. I envisioned trying to do the renovations on my own and dissolved into further floods of tears.

‘Feck it, Carolinus, we have moved country,’ said Sean, trying to cheer me up, but only making me cry harder. The stress of our move was taking its toll. We’d moved country before but not like this: then it was in the same language and with the security of the large multinational for which I worked. It wasn’t just getting familiar with physically hard work. We hadn’t made love in months – living in a room with our daughters didn’t help. Romance was forgotten in change overload. We were spending more time together than ever, but I had never felt so estranged from Sean.

That afternoon, a neighbour we met in passing at the village fête dropped in. Jamie was an impressive character who had worked his way up to being vineyard manager of one of the largest wine estates in our region. He had spent half his life in England and half in France and the speed of his French when he talked on his mobile left me breathless and envious. We had a chat then he looked uncomfortable.

‘I’ve got a favour to ask of you,’ he said. ‘I need a *chai*. We’ve got problems with some of our vats. This year will be a catastrophe if we don’t find somewhere else to make our wine and since you’re not using yours this year I thought of you.’

A winery is called a *chai*, pronounced ‘shay’. We hadn’t worked up the courage to venture into ours.

## GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

We leapt at Jamie's proposal which provided the opportunity to watch a harvest in our own winery and to get to know the equipment. A week later we rose early to see him bringing in the first of his grapes with François, his colleague. The weather was changing, autumn had arrived and with it that morning a chilly five degrees. With Ellie wrapped in blankets in her pram and Sophia bundled up in her winter coat we watched, enthralled, as the dawn poked long gold fingers through the vines. The harvest machine was already motoring up and down the rows and soon the trailer loads were arriving every half-hour. Jamie explained the idiosyncrasies of our winery as he and François worked frenetically to move their machine-harvested grapes from the trailer into a vat. He had to yell above the noise of the tractor that drove a pump in the trailer to push the grapes into a massive pipe oriented into the vat. I hung onto Sophia, anxious to keep her out of the way of the large machinery.

A few hours later the harvest machine left and there was a moment of peace before I had to take Sophia to school. Jamie offered us cups of fresh, pure sauvignon blanc. It was super-sweet grape juice but with the classic aromas of lime and gooseberry and a delicious zesty finish. We had learned these terms in textbooks and tasting finished wine; now we were getting to apply them in the process of winemaking. This was why we were here. It raised us out of our renovation rut and made our dream feel real.

Jamie was a regular visitor from then on, arriving at the winery at least once a day and sometimes twice a day. His arrival would often be accompanied by noise as he pumped liquids from one vat to another or heated or cooled them with our heat exchanger. Just moving the heat exchanger and associated pumps and pipes to the different zones of the winery was heavy work. We exchanged

few words most days, but having him come by made me feel less lonely. We were also getting an idea of how much physical work went into making wine.



Jamie did a lot more than rent our *chai*. He taught Sean how to drive the tractor and was an infinite source of advice, encouragement and contacts. One of the contacts was the Chamber of Agriculture; we were the right side of forty to get some free help and perhaps some financial aid under the *jeune agriculteur*, young farmer, banner.

One of the chamber's representatives, Monsieur Ducasse, suggested we meet. I took copious notes on the phone about how to get to his office and he remained remarkably restrained as I asked him to repeat everything many times.

Without a single wrong turn we arrived on time, and clean – Ellie was still in the habit of throwing up on me. Monsieur Ducasse was chunky and dark with serious eyes framed by bushy eyebrows. He welcomed us politely, clearly taken aback by the arrival of a seven-month-old to the meeting. I wedged Ellie's buggy between Sean and myself, gave her a bottle of milk, then explained our situation. Sean's French wasn't up to participating so he left it all to me.

Monsieur Ducasse's severe look darkened with each word.

'We want to know what help we can get from you since we are new to this business,' I said.

'What farming experience do you have?' he asked.

'None really... But we both grew up in a rural environment,' I said helpfully.

Monsieur Ducasse's Gallic eyebrows rose.

‘But you must have some practical farming experience?’ he pressed.

‘Well, we had a small organic vegetable patch in our city garden,’ I replied.

The eyebrows shot up.

‘We had two grape vines in the garden,’ I added quickly.

His eyes popped out.

‘What about an agricultural degree?’ he asked.

‘No, we have masters degrees in economics and finance,’ I said.

Ellie watched him suspiciously, sensing his discomfort, while he made urgent notes on the page in front of him.

‘How many employees do you have helping in the vineyard and winery?’ he asked at last.

‘None. We can’t afford employees. Anyway, the property is small enough for Sean to farm on his own.’

‘Not even part-time?’ he gasped, wedging his hand under his chin to stop his mouth from gaping open.

‘No... But we have a neighbour who is giving us lots of useful advice,’ I said hoping to save him from cardiac arrest. ‘He told us to contact you.’

His eyebrows were now within a whisker of his hairline. There were a few minutes of silence wherein he sought to regain control of his facial parts. Ellie watched him intently, finding the drama of his expressions very entertaining.

‘There is nothing we can do to help you,’ he said eventually, delivering a massive blow to our hopes of aid money to help keep our leaking ship afloat.

Seeing my dismay he tried to explain his position.

‘You need an agricultural degree from a French university to get onto the young farmer aid programme, or you need to do a university equivalent programme in Périgueux.’

I started to ask something about the programme.

‘It’s in French,’ he said, stopping me in my tracks and making it clear he didn’t consider my language skills up to the level required.

‘I thought your organisation was here to help farmers, especially new farmers, like us,’ I said bitterly.

‘I think there is someone who can help you in the vineyard. I’ll give you the number for Cécile Bernard, she’s our vineyard advisor for your area.’

We thanked him despite feeling that we got nothing from the exchange except depression at our lack of farming credentials. The young farmer programme opens the door to layer upon layer of aid, something he didn’t explain. By not being on it at the start, we were excluded from benefits that multiplied through the system.

Fortunately, we got more than we realised when Cécile Bernard became our advisor.



Cécile was a wonderful woman with a heart of gold, brown, curly hair, and a ready smile. She was in her thirties and knew vineyards. When she arrived to meet us a few weeks later Sean dragged me out despite my reluctance to get involved in vineyard work. His lack of French meant that I already knew more about tractors and other farm equipment than I wanted to.

With Ellie on my hip we walked the vineyards with Cécile. She and Sean made good progress despite the language barrier. I tuned out and busied myself with eating the delectable botrytis sauvignon blanc that had been left on the vines. Botrytis is a miraculous ‘noble’ rot that develops on late-harvest grapes under special conditions. It concentrates the flavours and sugars to produce the most heavenly taste. The way the late-harvest grapes develop is unique, and hence considered worthy of a

special designation, giving the wine of Saussignac its commune appellation.

Appellation is an ancient concept developed in France to denote a quality food or drink from a geographic area. The first food to gain the pre-cursor to appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC) was Roquefort cheese back in the 1400s. Wine appellations were relative latecomers, only officially initiated in 1935. Our reds, rosés and dry whites fell under the Bergerac appellation, one of the original areas to gain AOC status. Saussignac was made a commune appellation in 1982 but its dessert wines were famous as early as the 1500s. At the time all I knew was that those grapes were so good I could not stop myself.

As I stuffed the fifth bunch into my mouth, I noticed that Sean was having difficulty understanding something Cécile was saying. Cécile repeated herself. Sean turned to me.

‘I think she’s trying to ask us a question.’

‘I know, but I didn’t catch what it was.’

Cécile looked at us as if we were aliens from outer space.

‘Are you trying to ask Sean something?’

Cécile cracked up and all three of us roared with laughter while Ellie looked on in mild amusement. I think she had realised just how little we knew about how to farm vines. Here we were trying to learn something completely new and complex – winegrowing – in a language we didn’t even understand. If we didn’t laugh we would have cried. I felt like I was Alice in Wonderland. We had a long way to go.



My birthday card from our closest friends, Barry and Aideen, arrived with the caption: ‘The road to a friend’s house is never

long.’ I dissolved into tears. There was a silver lining inside the card; they were coming to visit us in a few weeks.

The night they arrived we set up camp for them in the second half of the house where renovations we still seriously required. Cillian, their nine-year-old son, and Juliette, their seven-year-old daughter, were ecstatic; it was a real adventure being in an abandoned semi-ruin. Mattresses, sleeping bags and boxes as side-tables offered simple comfort. We put the kids to bed early and settled down to catch up, starting with an aperitif of the Saussignac dessert wine we bought with the property.

‘This is fantastic,’ said Barry.

Aideen followed with more superlative comments. She grabbed my notebook and took tasting notes. Then we tasted the reds.

‘You must sell these wines direct this Christmas,’ said Barry.

We had been enjoying the wines but we didn’t feel confident enough to sell them. Sean had taken samples to a *négociant* nearby who had voiced interest – but at outrageously low prices.

‘Are they good enough to market to our future customer base?’ I asked.

‘You have to. If you wait, people will forget you. Get the offer out there.’

‘But how will we do it in time for Christmas? It’s nearly November.’

‘It can’t be that hard,’ said Barry. ‘Do the sales over the Internet.’

We had worked on large-scale transactional Internet projects, Sean for the bank and myself for diverse clients, but that seemed far away in the past, although it was a mere three months since we’d moved. The bottles we bought were ‘nude’ so we needed labels and capsules, the covers that go over the corks, then we’d need a shipping partner and approval from the customs authorities to ship the wine.

Undaunted by the logistical problems, we spent the evening coming up with labels and tasting notes for the sales campaign which in a few hours had become a reality. ‘Ho Ho Haut Garrigue’ became our Christmas tag line, but ‘Sassy Saussignac’ in bold gold with lurid pink lips underneath didn’t look quite as appealing the following morning when we all got up to participate in our first ever hand-harvest of ‘sassy’ dessert wine.

We arrived at the Barse’s, the family that had hosted us at their B&B. Their ancient uncle was in the winery and didn’t recognise us. When we’d stayed in the B&B we visited his half of the Barse house, which was like stepping back in time. Medieval cobbles on the floor were cracked and worn from centuries of use and, opposite the door, a huge fireplace with hooks and pots hanging over it was still in use as the primary cooking facility. He greeted us warily and escorted us to where the extended family was picking grapes. To him, after a lifetime of working this vineyard, anyone offering to help hand-harvest for fun was regarded with suspicion.

Sun filtered through the vines highlighting pickers in a honeyed haze. Mist, part of the secret of the unique Saussignac botrytis which creates these sweet wines from heaven, was painted in golden airbrush strokes over the scene. All was quiet save for a few bird calls and chatter between pickers. Bernard greeted us warmly and gave us a succinct lesson which I endeavoured to translate as succinctly for our friends. He handed round harvest secateurs and baskets with a brief warning about taking care. A few minutes later he passed by my basket and removed a bunch whose botrytis was less developed than the rest. Without saying a word he had set the level for me.

Cillian quickly copped on, removing grapes that were a bit green or the ones that had gone too far. Juliette nicked her finger

but after a plaster and a kiss was back picking more eagerly than before. The magic and excitement of harvest time spread a unique energy through us. Even Sophia gathered some bunches, while Ellie looked on from her all-terrain buggy. '*Les enfants* are often the best at picking Saussignac,' said Myriam. 'Their senses are much finer than ours.' Back in the *chai*, Bernard passed round cups of juice as it came out of the press. It was thick as honey and as sweet but with layers of flavour: apricot, almond and orange. Standing in the winery surrounded by the noises and smells of harvest I felt joy and excitement mingled with a little fear. Making wine, for all the hard work, created a deep resonance inside me. I was spellbound. We had witnessed our first harvest of the miraculous Saussignac wine.



When the O'Briens left, we tackled the Christmas sales campaign with vigour. It seemed impossible but within a few weeks Sean had provisional approval from the authorities, our labels ready to print and a shipper lined up.

We sent personal emails to our friends and former colleagues, not expecting to sell more than twenty cases. We watched the orders come in through our new website with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. We passed the twenty-case mark overnight. By the deadline we had 115 orders and more promised including an order for corporate Christmas gifts from a close friend.

Sean contacted the shipper to let them know we would be sending three pallets. He emailed back to say the customs official would not accept the shipment. We were horrified. The official had given Sean the go-ahead as long as we prepaid the taxes before the shipment left our property. What had gone wrong? Sean called our customs contact on the speaker phone.

## GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

‘We gave you the go-ahead for this delivery because it was a shipment to friends, not 1,800 bottles,’ said the official.

I felt a rush of nausea but Sean remained calm.

‘You are right. When I spoke to you I estimated three to six hundred bottles, which was what we were expecting, but we have been amazed at the response.’

‘Are you sure this was an email offer to friends? You didn’t have any advertising in a newspaper or magazine?’

‘No, this was an email to friends and colleagues.’

‘We’ll let you do it this time,’ he said. ‘For next time you will have to have completed your registration and have your tax representative approved.’

I danced a jig around our rustic temporary office in the boiler room, while the customs official explained the concept of a tax representative: an administrative project for another day.



Overnight the weather changed to freezing. The 1,800 bottles had to be lovingly washed in icy water before being ‘dressed’. With frozen fingers we revelled in the exhilaration of our first order and the rich aromas of wine and oak that surrounded us in our ancient barn.

After washing, the wine moved to capsuling, fixing the metal cap over the top of the bottle to cover the cork. To seal the capsule, the bottle is fed into an exceptionally noisy, rocket-shaped apparatus, called a *capsuleuse*. The right amount of pressure must be applied: too little pressure and the capsule comes out like a skirt, frilly and ruffled at the base; too much pressure and the top of the capsule is pierced. After a few hours of practice Sean was an expert and the capsules were smooth. Ellie was remarkably good-natured despite

the noise, wrapped in five layers of blankets in her buggy, calmly watching the progress.

For days we listened to U2 and labelled cases with familiar addresses feeling cold, happy and homesick at the same time. The order represented a critical start for our wine business. When the transporter collected we felt inordinately proud; we hadn't made the wine but it came from our vineyard.



The vines changed colour. Their leaves fell. At night we froze despite still being huddled together in one room. I struggled on with the renovations, learning to wield a screwdriver and a paint roller like a pro. The local building supplies man greeted me with glee whenever I appeared. My hands were calloused. I wore the same paint-splattered working clothes for weeks on end. It was a shock change from our city lives of business suits, cappuccinos and heated offices.

Early December we were wracked with coughing, vomiting and fevers. I could barely drag myself out of bed to attend to Sean and our sick daughters. There was a mountain of washing and we didn't have a tumble dryer. Phil Collins' lyrics about the roof leaking and the wind howling kept rolling around in my head. After doing another round of nursing I went to see our local doctor in desperation. I needed to be well to care for everyone.

'There is a mild chest infection but you can fight it off yourself with a week of rest,' he said.

'I want an antibiotic. Someone has to look after the sick children.'

'Isn't there someone who can help you? Your *belle-mère*?'

I explained that there was no mother-in-law and there would be no rest.

Minutes later I walked into the pharmacy armed with my prescription. With two young children, I was already well known to them. A large promotion stand at the entrance announced the launch of a new deodorant with 48-hour effectiveness. I giggled despite my throbbing headache. Who would advertise not washing every day? To my 'cleanliness next to Godliness' upbringing it was incomprehensible. Little did I know that a week later, when the real cold of winter set in, I would be back for some of my own. Our erratic heating system couldn't match the deep freeze. Bathing every two days was as much as I could stand. I left the pharmacy armed with my medicine and returned to my sick household.

Just when it seemed it would never end, we woke up feeling well, the sun was shining and a huge rainbow hung over the Dordogne valley. We ate our favourite lunch of baguette and Brie and stared at the view. Ellie smiled benevolently from her high chair and Sophia tucked in with relish. Food never tasted so good and we revelled in the magic of feeling well.

I could not fault our new community. People were generous and warm. Bernard Barse did the electrical work for our new kitchen as a gift. Even the notorious French civil servants were friendly and helpful. Sophia started singing in French, proving our worries about her settling in unfounded. I agonised about our precarious financial future but the success of the Christmas offer filled me with hope. Ellie started crawling and putting her tiny hands into my paint and other undesirable substances. Meanwhile Sean's thoughts turned in earnest to the vineyard: a place bristling with unknown danger.

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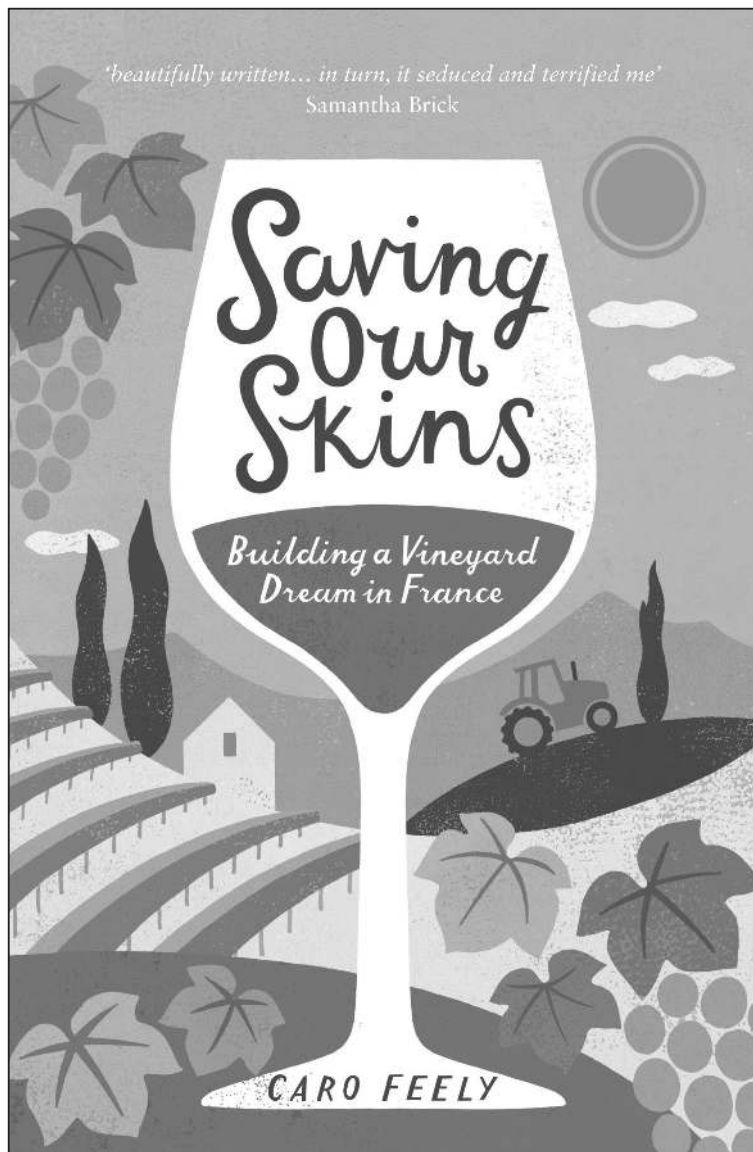
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# Saving Our Skins

*Building a Vineyard  
Dream in France*

CARO FEELY



# SAVING OUR SKINS

## Building a Vineyard Dream in France

Caro Feely

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Frost can be fatal to a fledgling wine business... gorgeous glitter with a high price tag. On a winter's day it is beautiful, but on a spring day after bud burst it spells devastation. For Sean and Caro Feely, a couple whose love affair with wine and France has taken them through financial and physical struggle to create their organic vineyard, it could spell the end. Until they receive an unexpected call that could save their skins...

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# GLASS HALF FULL

*The Ups and Downs of  
Vineyard Life in France*

GARO FEELY

# GLASS HALF FULL

## The Ups and Downs of Vineyard Life in France

Caro Feely

£9.99

Paperback

ISBN: 978-1-84953-991-3

*Hand harvesting was a different process to machine harvesting. It was convivial and slow. We started at dawn and slowly proceeded across the vineyards. It was better for us and for the grapes, the human scale and pace of it more peaceful and joyful.*

But this rose-tinted glimpse of life is only part of the story – with it come long hours, uncertainty and their associated stress. For Seán and Caro Feely, the rollercoaster ride of managing a growing business is as challenging as making natural wine in harmony with the environment. Will the previous six years of hard work that created a flourishing organic vineyard in France prove worthwhile? Join Caro on her search for balance in life and wine. Does yoga hold the secret? And will she make it through this growth phase with marriage, farm and sanity intact?

Order from your local book shop or **buy Glass Half Full at Amazon.**



I took a deep draught and swirled it around feeling the warming sensation of alcohol on the back of my throat. The wine filled my mouth with plum and blackberry. The finish had a hint of spice and an attractive saline minerality. 'Delicious.' I licked my lips. The wine filled me with joy. A picture of a vineyard drenched in sunlight formed in my mind. Sean drew me rudely back to the lounge of our semi-d.

'How can they be in liquidation if they make wine this good?'



When Caro and Sean find the perfect ten-hectare vineyard in Saussignac, it seems their dreams of becoming winemakers in the south of France are about to come true. But, rather than making a smooth transition from city slickers to *connaisseurs du vin*, they arrive in France with their young family (a toddler and a newborn) to be faced with a dilapidated eighteenth-century farmhouse and 'beyond eccentric' winery. Undeterred by a series of setbacks, including mouse infestations and a nasty accident with an agricultural trimmer, they embark on the biggest adventure of their lives – learning to make wine from the roots up.

*'A must-read for anyone who's dreamed of owning their own vineyard... an inspiring story of how one couple changed their lives.'*

Jamie Ivey, author of  
*Extremely Pale Rosé*



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