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winemakers in the luberon



Baron François Faverot de Kerbrech – the name conjures up images of rococo ballrooms and powdered wigs, or perhaps a dashing cavalry officer. Take a look at a bottle of Domaine Faverot wine and that is what you see: a golden silhouette of a soldier on horseback. “That’s my great-grandfather, who was a general in the army of Napoléon III. And his father was in the army of Napoléon I,” says François of his illustrious ancestors. “I’ve gone back as far as his father, who was the mayor of Pontivy in Brittany during the French Revolution. Although he was an aristocrat, he wasn’t seen to be one, so he escaped the guillotine. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.” He says this with a wry smile.

‘Here’ is a small vineyard in the Luberon hills near the tiny village of Maubec, about 10 kilometres east of Cavaillon. And like his Breton mayor ancestor, François isn’t what you would expect from a French aristocrat. He’s half English, for a start. In a story as romantic as the setting of his vineyard, François tells



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how his parents met on a boat while travelling from Paris to London in 1946. “She was with her sister, and my father was with his brother. When they got to London, they were

Facing page: François and Sally relax with a bottle of their Luberon vintage
This page, top: outside Domaine Faverot
Above: guests can enjoy vineyard views across the property’s swimming pool

out together all the time, having parties at the Ritz. They had a great time.”

His parents married in 1947 and lived in Primrose Hill, which explains François’ north London accent. When he answers the phone, he switches to French with the ease of someone who has spent his 59 years with a foot in both countries. François doesn’t use his title, and ▶





doesn't see a need to exploit his aristocratic background; preferring to stay in Provence and make his award-winning Côtes du Luberon wines from the winery he set up in 1998 with his wife Sally – another Brit who spent much of her life in France before moving permanently. François' passion for wine began

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when an elderly aunt, fretting about her nephew's lack of a proper trade, gave him a book about wine for his 21st birthday. "I was so fascinated that I thought: this is what I'm going to do. So I went straight into the wine trade and never left it."

This page, clockwise from left: a quiet spot in the courtyard; a selection of vintages on sale; inside the winery

It was while he was selling wine more than 30 years ago that he met Sally; she had been running her own wine bar in north London at the time. "Clearly she needed some help with the wine list," says François, smiling. "We got together and that was that. I just sort of fell into the restaurant business. But I wanted to have my own vineyard. That's always been the dream. I wanted to make my own wine."

Memories of childhood holidays in Provence drew him back to the region. "We'd be taken as kids and be absolutely thrilled to bits. We'd arrive on the Golden Arrow train, and then the Mistral train. I always





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wanted to be in Provence.”

They started house-hunting in 1994, when it was a seller's market, but they could wait for exactly the right thing on their limited budget. “My estate agent said: ‘Go and look further west, towards Arles and Pézenas, and Roussillon where it's much cheaper.’ But it's not Provence. We did look, but I thought, just as much as I'm a north London boy, I'm an east Rhône man. I don't cross the river.”

When the right property did come along in 1998, François bought it the day after he first laid eyes on it – and that was after a warning from his estate agent that the house was a complete wreck. But there was potential in the 18th-century stone Provençal *mas* (farmhouse) that, like many in the region, had originally been part of a silkworm farm before vines were planted back in 1920. It had a wing for the gîtes he and Sally had planned to build, 5.5 hectares of vines, various outbuildings and 800m² of space. At least the vines



were in good condition, having been tended by a local man who had been taking the grapes to the co-op, but the buildings hadn't been lived in for 18 years.

The first thing they did was to build the winery, because you can't keep the vines waiting. The gîtes came next, the running of which has

always been Sally's responsibility. To say it was a hectic time is an understatement: they still had the restaurant in London to run and had to live in various rented gîtes while the building work was being done. “We'd come here for two weeks, make wine, go back to England, run the restaurant, come back and make wine,” recalls François.

He had done a Master of Wine course for five years and although in his words, he ‘never quite managed to pass it’, he had travelled around the world working in wineries. “I wasn't a complete novice,” he says. “But as usual with this kind of thing, the practical work is quite different from the theory.”

The secret to winemaking, he says, is simple: “All it is, is making 10,000 decisions a day. Once you do that, you're fine.” He laughs when asked about how long it took to make a profit. “Making wine and making a profit are not necessarily the same thing. In real terms, we probably lost money the first four or >

This page, top:
the verdant
courtyard offers a
shaded dining spot
Above: one of the
gîte bedrooms





lifestyle



five years. The biggest surprise was trying to sell the stuff. It's difficult to establish any market, whether it's export or local market. It's really hard to get known.

"A few people were brilliant supporters at the beginning, saying: 'As soon as you make the wine, we'll buy it.' Very encouraging, but that's still only a few people. When you start out you, have to do a few salons. I did Copenhagen, Brussels, London. OK, I was fairly well connected in London. A couple of friends there took wine off me. You just have to keep plodding on, and persevere, and keep knocking on doors."

While François looks after the vineyard – on his own, apart from locals brought in for the harvest, and a man who helps with the pruning – Sally runs the parallel gîtes business which has been keeping the vineyard afloat. "We opened the gîtes in 2002, and they were amazingly successful from day one," says François. "So while the wine was struggling, the

This page, clockwise from above: one of the grape varieties grown on-site; a view over the vineyards; inside François and Sally's home

gîtes were at least making money and paying the bank off, which was the most important thing."

Sally adds: "It's hard work. It's a lot tougher than we expected. But it's

While François looks after the vineyard – on his own, apart from the locals brought in for the harvest – Sally runs the parallel gîtes business

worth it. We've always worked together for 33 years. We have our own domains. We ask each other for advice and that helps."

The four gîtes have central heating and log fires, which means Sally's season runs all year round. "I get

more people coming in the winter on and off. At Christmas and New Year we fill up," she says. "It's gorgeous here, with all the Christmas markets. At the same time, you've got the paperwork and everything has to be cleaned, redecorated and refreshed."

Despite the overwhelming numbers of people who descend on the Luberon over the summer months, François says he is spared the influx seen in villages such as Gordes. "It's never that busy. It always amazes me," he says. "Restaurants are full, yet you never see anybody. Well, that's an exaggeration. A traffic jam in Maubec is two cars, in Cavaillon maybe six."

Enough people do beat a path to his vineyard, however, as about 40





TIPS for would-be winemakers

Keep trying to sell to local restaurants and bars. Don't give up at the first attempt.

• Restaurants want all three colours – red, white and rosé – so make certain you can provide this.

• Listen to feedback about the quality and be prepared to adjust your winemaking style.

• Be aware of the cost of shipping small quantities outside of France. The duty that needs to be paid can wipe out any profit.

• Dropping the price to extremely low levels to boost sales won't work in the long term unless you're prepared to cut corners.

• Most importantly, learn French.



per cent of his wine income now comes from selling at the cellar door. That's a hefty proportion of the 25,000 to 30,000 bottles he makes a year. He still tends two of the original parcels of land that were planted back in 1920. "It's an old vine, Carignan," he says. "Not much juice comes off it, but what does come is fantastic. It's a lot of work for very little, but it's such good quality. It's worth it." Grenache grapes were added in the 1950s, and Syrah in the 1970s. François planted up several additional parcels of land in 1999 and 2000.

There is scope for expansion, but the idea doesn't appeal to them. François explains: "You have to make a decision: either stay small and be a boutique winery dealing

with boutique wine sellers, which is exactly what I've done. Or you could almost quadruple your size, which I wouldn't want to do. Then you're moving into a whole new ball game."

Evidently small is beautiful in this corner of the Luberon, with its pine-strewn hills and wide green valleys. François revels in the view beyond his vines where, he says, the sky turns a deep shade of purple at sunset. It enchants him as much as winemaking does. "There's nothing that gives you a buzz quite like seeing a bottle of your wine on someone else's table. It still excites me when I see that. Luckily I see that quite often," he says with a grin. "It's a great feeling." LF
www.domainefaverot.eu
www.cottages-faverot.com

This page, clockwise from top left: François and Sally raise a glass; Domaine Faverot welcomes visitors year-round

