

A local's view

Anna and Wilson Thorburn created the *Domaine l'Ancienne École*, near Nyons, 12 years ago, converting the vineyard to organic agriculture and renovating three gîtes which enjoy panoramic views of Mont Ventoux

What were you doing before you moved to France and what prompted you to make the move?

The last few years we lived in the UK I had been doing some part-time legal work (I worked full-time as a solicitor before I had my third child) and my husband was still a full-time lawyer.

We had often thought about leaving the pressure of working in the city and living in the south-east of the UK and wine was something we both liked. We also had family in France and having lived there as a child I speak fluent French, so France was the obvious choice.

We were also conscious from watching TV programmes about moving abroad, that the younger the children, the easier it would be for them.

What attracted you to Drôme?

Although we had long dreamed of making wine, we weren't initially set on Drôme, but looked over quite a wide area over an 18-month period.

However, some of the places further west (in Languedoc) just didn't feel right,



Lunch with a bottle of rosé

even if on paper they met our criteria. We already knew the Nyons area from having 'discovered' it by accident on a holiday years before (thank goodness for *déviations*). It's hard to describe what makes the area so appealing, but part of it is the climate, caught between the full heat of southern Provence and the cool of the Alps.

Did you find it easy to find a suitable property with land?

When we saw what is now *Domaine l'Ancienne École*, about 18 months into our search, we fell in love with the views and its proximity to Nyons, as well as the winemaking potential of having land within the area for AOC Vinsobres.

We bought the land and buildings and farmed remotely for two years (not something I'd really recommend) while we started the first of many building renovations. I finally moved here full-time with the children 10 years ago now, in 2009, so my first vintage 'on site' was one of the best vintages the area had had in years and the first winter was the coldest and snowiest for 30 years.

Since then we have carried out three more sets of renovations/building projects and moved around the buildings twice.

The first move came in the summer of 2011, to vacate what became our first two holiday rentals. After yet another tranche of refurbishment, we stopped using what is now our third gîte in 2016.

What do you most enjoy about living in Vinsobres in particular?

When we moved to France, we were not looking for an expatriate community, but



The Domaine produces red and rosé wines

wanted to be part of 'normal' village life and Vinsobres definitely provided that. The children initially went to the village primary school (secondary schools mean a bus trip to Nyons) as a result of which we met many of our friends and I also became involved with the organisation responsible for the AOC Vinsobres wines. The Vinsobrais welcomed us with open arms. Vinsobres may be a small village but it has grand views. Living and working in its wonderful environment is definitely the best aspect of our life. As one of my *vigneron* friends said, sometimes you just have to look up from the job in hand and take in the scenery, not take it for granted.

What is it like throughout the seasons?

From my perspective, the best times of year are spring and autumn: not too hot, not too cold and (usually) not too wet, so it's a great time of year for long country walks. Summer can get a bit hot, but being out of the village at 400m altitude, it's rare for the heat to build up for a whole season and the nights are cooler than in town. Winter can be cold, but on a clear sunny

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Above: Anna and Wilson fell in love with the views
Top right: Enjoy a picnic among the vines
Right: Les Pré-Alpes one-bedroom apartment



day, protected from any Mistral wind that might be blowing, it's often possible to sit outside in shirt sleeves for lunch (or indeed for pre-Christmas drinks) as there is warmth in the sun's rays.

What do your guests most enjoy about your location by the foothills of the Alps?

Although we and some of our guests like to explore the area on foot, many others enjoy cycling and some stay with us specifically because we are within striking distance of Mont Ventoux.

Some just want peace and quiet with amazing views, surrounded by vines and lavender. Yet others discover that we are perfectly placed between the northern and southern Rhône vineyards, so they can use us as a base for exploring all that the Rhône valley has to offer in terms of wines. Of course, they don't have to go anywhere at all to taste wine, they can do it right here. We always offer wine tastings to our guests. Tastings are also available during our open season for wine sales and by prior appointment in the off season.

Which wine is your favourite?

Well, in the summer it's hard to beat a chilled glass of our rosé, but in the winter, over a weekend lunch with family or friends I like to open a bottle of our

“Living and working in the village’s wonderful environment is definitely the best aspect of our life”

L'Essentiel - it's a typical AOC Vinsobres: fruity, slightly spicy, with depth of flavour and colour.

Is there any aspect of living in Drôme that surprised you?

One of the surprises about living in Drôme Provençale has been the fact that you can ski in winter. We expected sun and heat, but not that the closest small resorts are under two hours' drive away.

Another surprise (to me at least) was its history of Resistance. The Vercors is very proud of its harbouring of Resistance fighters during the Second World War, but in fact it was building on a long tradition: Drôme was a Protestant stronghold at

various times during France's wars of religion. In fact, Vinsobres has both a 'temple' (Protestant) and an 'église' (Catholic). The denominations have swapped over the years depending on which faith needed the bigger building.

What advice would you give to expats thinking of running a winery in France?

The best advice is to do your research carefully. There are many rules and regulations governing how you make wine (grape varieties, vinification methods), what you can call it (AOC, Vin de Pays, Vin de France), what information the *Douanes* (Customs & Excise) expect you to provide and when you have to provide it.

Wine is an alcohol and a proud part of France's agricultural heritage, both these factors mean that it's not *carte blanche* for planting vines and making wine. Use a reputable specialist vineyard agent for your search and they should be able to either help you with the basics or put you in touch with someone who can. domaine-lancienne-ecole.com

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