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Bordeaux's latest British invasion

Experts have been keeping French glasses full by tending some of the region's vineyards, says **Andy Lynes**

Could there be anything more French than a fine Bordeaux wine? A Graves Rouge for example, made from cabernet sauvignon and merlot grapes grown on vines planted on a south-facing slope on the left bank of the Garonne river. As it turns out, there could. Although the wine made at Chateau du Seuil is typical of the region, with its complex fruit flavours and nicely integrated oak and tannins, its makers are not.

In 2001, Nicola Allison moved with her husband, Sean, to the tiny village of Cérons, 22 miles from Bordeaux to take over the running of the elegant, 19th-century chateau and its vineyards from her Welsh parents.

"You don't go into the industry if you want to make money," Nicola tells me as her dog, Benji, energetically chases his ball around the chateau's neatly trimmed lawns. "It's a lifestyle choice, but one that you work hard to maintain."

Although the Allison's are the only Brits in their village, they are far from being the only British immigrants in Bordeaux. Gavin and Angela Quinney have been making wine at Chateau Bauduc in Créon in the Entre-deux-Mers since 1999 and now supply the likes of Gordon Ramsay and Rick Stein. Anna and Andrew Barwick

rent out the luxury Chateau Rigaud close to St Emilion and Welshman Alan Jones produces caviar d'Aquitaine at his hatchery near St-Fort-sur-Gironde, and there are dozens more examples.

This British invasion of Bordeaux and its strong connection to the region's food and drink have historic beginnings. After the marriage of Henry II to Eleanor of Aquitaine, Bordeaux

came under English rule between 1152 and 1453. It was then that the British first developed their taste for "claret" (from the French *clairret*, originally used to refer to a dark rosé wine rather than the rich reds we are familiar with today).

Although the Allison's are helping to maintain the region's traditions by being one of only eight producers of Cérons sweet white wine, they are also keen to innovate. "In the past, Bordeaux had felt that it didn't need wine tourism but that's changing," says Nicola as she shows me around the chateau's bijou winery. "We get a lot of English-speaking visitors for our tastings and winery tours because there's no language barrier."

Chateau du Seuil contributes 130,000 bottles a year to the region's massive annual wine production of 700 million bottles. With 300 acres of vineyards and hundreds of producers, Bordeaux is one of the largest and

most complex wine growing regions on earth.

In an attempt to get my head around it all, I headed for the L'Ecole du Vin, a handsome wedge of a building overlooking the elegant Place de la Comédie in the centre of the city of Bordeaux. Our tutor for the afternoon's introductory lecture on matching Bordeaux wine with food is dapper Englishman Alexander Hall, who moved to the area in 2004 and has since set up the Bespoke Bordeaux wine tour company.

During a fascinating couple of hours, I fill my notebook with

facts and figures about soil types, grape varieties and wine styles. I learn about the diversity of the region (like Heinz, Bordeaux has 57 varieties or *appellations* that relate to specific geographical

locations) and different elements of the wine itself such as acidity, sweetness and tannins.

So at the end of the session, when I finally get to taste some wine, I really taste it. I swirl my glass of Chateau la Freynelle 2005 and sniff the bouquet. I can almost smell the clay and limestone soil of the Entre-deux-Mers in the fresh, bright aromas of lemon and, oddly enough,

grapes. I take a sip and the taste is dry, acidic and refreshing. I'm getting citrus fruits, grapefruit, and quite possibly more than a little pretentious, but it's all great fun.

We get to exercise our new-found wine expertise when, later that evening, Hall leads a food and wine matching session and dinner at the nearby Quai des Saveurs cooking school. While chef Georges Gotrand prepares dinner and flirts shamelessly with all the women in our group, we get down to the serious business of trying to decide which of the five wines being poured will go best with an unusual but delicious starter of smoked herring, cabbage and foie gras in a chicken and herring broth.

I fancy the sweet Sauternes, but the lack of consensus about which is the "right" wine that continues throughout the five-course meal just proves what a subjective and enjoyably contentious thing food and wine matching is.

There's time for a nightcap, and what better after all that rich food and fine wine than a proper pint in a good old British boozer. While it seems every pub in the UK now comes with a mandatory "gastro" prefix, business partners Ben Erskine and Ed Willey are keeping the tradition of the local alive. Set

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on the atmospheric Rue Borie, the Golden Apple is somewhat ironically located in the Chartres quarter, historically the centre of the city's wine trade.

A match is on and there's the expected group of shouty businessmen standing at the bar, but Ben tells me that most of his customers are drawn from within a half-mile circumference of the pub, attracted by Newcastle Brown Ale on tap, fish and chips on the chalkboard menu and the obligatory dartboard.

"When I first moved here 13 years ago, Bordeaux was sooty, dirty and smelly," Ben tells me. "Now that the town's been cleaned up, the tourists have started to come."

As we wander back to our hotel along the bank of the Garonne, the city seems newly minted. The Place de la Bourse, a magnificent example of 18th-century French architecture, looks stunning lit against the night sky. On the nearby Place de la Comédie, the Grand Hotel has recently been restored to its full glory and now rivals the Grand Théâtre it stands opposite for sheer jaw-dropping opulence.

With everything the city and region has to offer, it's easy to understand why Bordeaux is such a magnet for the Brits. I head for bed and dream of one day joining them.

COMPACT FACTS



HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0787; britishairways.com) flies to Bordeaux from London Gatwick from £94. Andy Lynes stayed at the Hotel Normandie (00 33 5 56 52 16 80; hotel-de-normandie-bordeaux.com) where a double room costs from €99 (£80) a night.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Office de Tourisme de Bordeaux (00 33 5 56 00 66 00; bordeaux-tourisme.com). L'Ecole du Vin, Bordeaux (00 33 5 56 00 22 85; vins-bordeaux.fr).



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Raise a glass: Chateau Bauduc, facing page, run by the Quinneys;
Bordeaux's Place de la Comédie, above T SANSON/BORDEAUX TOURISM