

Life is rosé

The British family who swapped London for Provence – to start their own wine label

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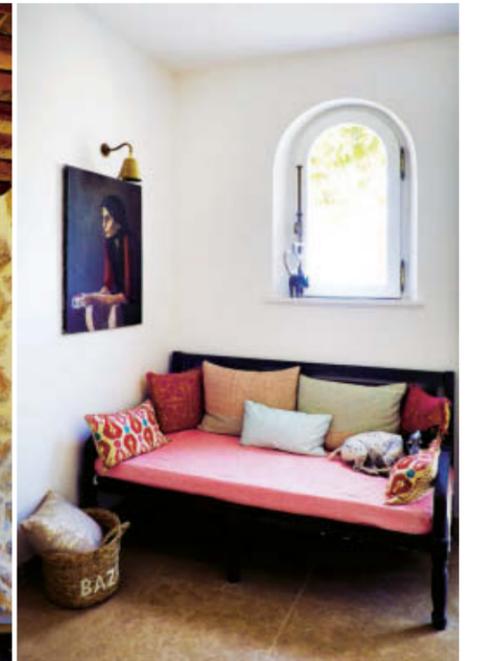


The Cronks' house near Aix-en-Provence. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Stephen and Jeany with their children Josie and George; Cotignac; Jeany; Cotignac market





Clockwise from this picture: the second kitchen; Oscar the dog relaxes; a lower terrace



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It was the first day of the Cronk family's new life. As Stephen reversed out of the driveway of their London home, his wife, Jeany, had her head between her legs and was sobbing. "And the kids said, 'Oh no, she's completely losing it,'" she says.

That was eight years ago. The Cronks were at the start of their big adventure from the London suburb of Teddington to a village called Cotignac in the south of France. When they got there, they would have no home of their own, no jobs and no friends. Their old house had been sold. There was no going back.

"We were so worried about the risk we were taking," says Jeany, now 44, who used to work in marketing, and whose children were eight (Josie), seven (Felix) and one (George) at the time. "We weren't young. We were middle-aged. I found it much harder than Stephen."

Her husband, who worked in telecoms, had reached a fork in his career. His choice was a major promotion, which would have meant seeing his kids even less, or redundancy. He saw the latter as his last opportunity to realise a dream: to make wine in Provence.

They deliberated over selling their London home for a year, but they needed "every bean we had", says Jeany.

The view from the house. Above: the ground-floor salon with art deco metal pocket doors



Cotignac is a village of around 2,000 people, locals and foreigners, burrowed at the foot of a cliff an hour east of Aix-en-Provence. It was fashionable among Brits in the Seventies: the Stones and David Bowie often spent time there while on the Côte d'Azur.

Fast-forward to 2017 and the Cronks are living there in the four-bedroom château they constructed, with three bilingual children, a dog and an award-winning rosé brand called Mirabeau. It may sound like the Provençal émigré dream, but "we've never worked so hard in our lives", says Jeany. It has been a bumpy road to success.

They rented for four years. Three of those were spent in a legal battle for planning permission, which they eventually lost. And Felix, now 15, was miserable. "We had to look into if we could afford to send him back to boarding school in England," says Jeany. "Eventually we decided against it, to keep the family together. And then, three months later, he was fine. All of a sudden, he was French."

Jeany had her eye on another plot, a forested area that was owned by somebody else locked in a planning war. But that didn't stop her climbing over the fence for covert recesses. When the owners won their case,

Jeany abandoned hope. Then it was put up for sale. "It was bizarre," she says. "But I knew I belonged there. I paid too much, but I thought, 'This is where I have to be.'"

Inspired by the work of the famous Bruno Lafourcade, who designed Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's nearby Château Miraval, Jeany teamed up with a local architect. The Cronks' home is built in the traditional bastide manor-house style of the region. "The French don't understand," says Jeany. "They think, 'Why would you build a house like your grandmother's?'"

It has pale pigeon-blue shutters and a façade rendered in marmorino, an Italian plaster. The bottom floor forms an open-plan L-shape, consisting of a salon and dining room separated by art deco metal pocket doors; then a kitchen, where the main feature is a wall of mismatched encaustic cement tiles sourced locally. Otherwise, the kitchen follows a Shaker design, with a truffler-coloured island where the family eat most of their meals.

Outside is a second kitchen area and a grand dining table under a pergola for al fresco dinners. A terrace with mulberry trees and lavender has a series of lounging areas so "guests can move from one to the

Clockwise from this picture: the main bedroom; the bathroom; Stephen and Oscar



other as the night goes on," says Jeany. "It's a simple life. I don't worry about whether my legs are waxed."

Beneath the terrace lies a "dry garden" (there is an ongoing drought in the area) with olive trees, and a lawn where the kids play and where they are often visited by wild boar. There's a tiny vineyard, but the vines are dead.

The Cronks do not grow their own grapes. They spent their first year crisscrossing the region and learning the wine-making ropes. Quickly they realised they couldn't compete with the experience of the centuries-old vineyards, and decided instead to work with them, blending their own cuvées. Now their wines are stocked in Waitrose and Sainsbury's and 40 other markets around the world. Their most recent is a sparkling pink.

Stephen, now 53, is chief taster, and continues to perfect his art. "It takes years of practice," says Jeany. He seems to be learning. Earlier this year, Mirabeau won two gold medals in France's biggest wine competition, the Concours International de Paris. "So," beams Jeany, "even the French like it." Proof that this was one risk worth taking. ■

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