



"We used to sit in traffic commuting, now I watch Sean driving our tractor across the vineyard"

Caroline Feely, 38, and her husband Sean, 38, left their jobs in Dublin and moved to the Dordogne with their daughters Sophia, three, and Elena, 18 months, to run their own vineyard.

OLD JOB IT consultant.
NEW JOB Owns and runs a vineyard.
START UP COST £250,000.
FIRST YEAR'S EARNINGS Expected to break even in 2007.

"We loved visiting France and often talked about how great it would be to ditch the rat race and bring our two girls up here. But how would we make money to live? Sean loves wine and had taken evening classes working towards a diploma, so

we would often fantasize about buying ourselves a vineyard. Finally, it was Sean who said, 'Why wait?'

We began searching the Internet for vineyards, but the reality was quite daunting. Neither of us had any experience of crop growing, my French was basic and we could only afford to buy if we sold up lock, stock and barrel in Dublin. There would be no safety net.

Then Sean saw Château Haut Garrigue near Bergerac in the Dordogne for sale. It had ten hectares of land and a farmhouse in need of repair, but the vineyard was functioning. We knew we had to move quickly, but Ellie was only a few weeks old, so Sean went out alone. When he came home I could tell he'd fallen for it. I trusted him, but I could barely believe that we were staking our whole future on a building I hadn't seen.

We resigned from our jobs, created a business plan

both for the vineyard and to turn an outbuilding into a gîte, so we'd have an extra income and then we put our house on the market. Friends and colleagues said we were either brave or mad.

When we arrived at the château in our hire car I could see why Sean had been so excited. The countryside stretched out around us. Then I looked around the house and my heart sank – it was more run-down than Sean had described.

Despite getting an architect to estimate how much we'd need to renovate, the work almost doubled our £25,000 budget. But we were very lucky on the business side.

The old owners let us help them bring in their harvest and over those six hard weeks we learned a great deal. We also signed up for the local agricultural programme and we've received huge support and encouragement from the community here.

A consultant visits every week and analyses one hectare of our land. After we pruned the vines in December she was very positive, even asking Sean where he had trained. We didn't dare say it was on the four vines in our old back garden.

From our research before we moved, we knew not to expect the vineyard to support us until year three, so for now we rely on our savings and the gîte.

I can hardly wait to try our first harvest. The wine here is delicious, but was sold on and never marketed from this estate, so we'll try and build it as a brand.

Life is so much better here. We used to sit

in traffic commuting, now I watch Sean driving our tractor across the vineyard. Sophia is at the local nursery school and chats away in French and, for Ellie, this is her life. We sit on the terrace watching deer and there's so much to explore. It's hard work, but I'm happy we didn't wait. It may never have happened." Visit www.wildearthwinery.com to find out more about Château Haut Garrigue. **w&h**

MY WORST MISTAKE

Budget – double any renovation estimate.

MY BEST MOVE Moving without a mortgage and making the commitment to start a big project while we and the children are still young.

MY TOP TIP All businesses involve risk, but if it's your dream, don't keep putting it off.