

# Wine and roses

Englishman Guy Boursot is selling French wine to both Brits and French alike with great success, as **Deborah Curtis** discovers



## PAS-DE-CALAIS (62)

**CAPITAL:**  
Arras

**REGION:**  
Nord-Pas-de-Calais



In the pretty northern French town of Ardres, some 15 minutes from the huge wine supermarkets of Calais, a small wine merchants run by Englishman Guy Boursot is doing a roaring trade.

Since Boursot's Wine Collection opened its doors in 2006, some 3,000 customers regularly make the journey from both the UK and the surrounding area in France to stock up on their favourite wines.

Before he opened his shop in a charming 250-year-old property next to the church in the centre of Ardres, wine writer, lecturer, consultant and vineyard tour operator Guy was a wine merchant in London but became tired of people coming into the shop to try wine before hopping across the Channel to buy at more favourable rates.

'I was getting fed up with people coming in and saying that they would like to buy, say, some champagne for a wedding. They would take away a sample and that would be it,' he says. 'If I happened to bump into them again and asked if they had liked the champagne, they would say yes but had gone over to France to buy it.'

Having realised that there was a niche in the market for a small retailer selling wines in France to

both British and French customers, Guy took the plunge and moved across the Channel in June 2001.

In fact, relocating to France was in a sense going back to his roots; as you might have guessed from his surname – Boursot – he has French heritage and his family have been involved in the wine trade on both sides of the Channel for at least 400 years.

'I wanted to open a quality wine shop where people could buy good wine at low French prices in a civilised environment,' he says. 'There was nobody doing that at the time.'

After an abortive business venture in partnership with others, Guy decided to strike out on his own and initially ran his wine merchants from his French home, which was then in the picturesque village of Journy, 20 mins south of Ardres. However, in the two years from 2004 to 2006, the business was sufficiently successful to enable him to buy and open the shop in Ardres, where he now lives in a renovated apartment above the shop with his wife Sophia.

## Personal touch

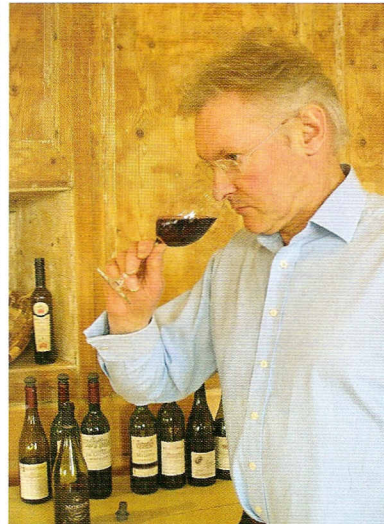
'I wanted to find a place that had a lot of character,' he says, 'and about 15 minutes south of Calais on the old north/south road you come to this quaint sixteenth-century town. People always say they didn't realise there was anywhere so nice so close to Calais and once people have been here, they come back again and again; if I had been in Calais that probably wouldn't have been the case.'

It is the personal touch he is able to offer them, which Guy believes his customers really appreciate. One customer comes over twice a year and buys 20





**Opposite:** Guy Boursot's wine merchants in Ardres is frequented by Brits and French alike **This page, left to right:** Guy deliberately chose the picturesque village of Ardres to offer his clients a taste of real France; he previously ran a wine merchants in London; clients return year after year for his carefully selected wines



cases to last for the intervening 6 months. Some bottles will be wine for everyday drinking, some for special occasions and the rest will be mid-range wine.

'The savings are colossal,' says Guy. 'As much as £3 a bottle on still wine and £8/9 on a bottle of champagne.'

This is not surprising when you consider that the tax in France is around 2p a bottle whereas in England it is closer to £2 and that is before the retailer has factored in their margin.

Guy sources his wines as directly as possible from the châteaux and *domaines* across France. He takes a personal interest in all the wines he sells and for him it is not just about people hopping on a ferry to buy wine for less than they would pay in the UK. He wants his customers to make the most of their trip to France.

## It may be only 23 miles across the Channel but it's a completely different culture and it's nice for people to enjoy that while they're here

'Things have changed,' he says. 'Now it's not just about the savings; people come and we make sure that they have a really good day out. It may be only 23 miles across the Channel but it's a completely different culture and it's nice for people to enjoy that while they're here.'

To this end, Guy offers gourmet dinners, wine tastings and wine talks to customers to help them make the most of their day in France.

'I find that people want to be able to trust the person who is supplying their wine,' he says. 'This is very much a personal business and people come back because they want to see me. I don't have the same objectives as large retailers. The most important thing to me is that the customer leaves happy and knowing

that they will return.'

Like the French gentleman who comes to the shop every day to shake hands, chat about the weather and pass the time of day before he buys the bottle of wine he will enjoy with his dinner, part of his daily routine like buying the bread.

'I have a lot of French customers,' says Guy, 'but they are more likely to come and buy one or two bottles at a time. A big order would be 12 bottles. The other difference is that my French customers tend to buy better quality wine; they are quite happy to spend €15 to €20 on a bottle.'

Having run wine businesses both in France and the UK, Guy is well placed to comment on the differences. Initially, he found the French system a steep learning curve and was taken aback by the astonishment bordering on suspicion with which his requests to start up a wine merchants were received. However, he was patient and persistent and having jumped through all the necessary bureaucratic hoops, he can see the benefits of a system which encourages financial prudence and care.

'Setting up a business here takes about 3 months,' he says, 'whereas in the UK you can buy a company and change the name in 24 hours. It was a very lengthy process. Once you get to the other side, however, it's easier to see the positive side.'

'It was very painful at the beginning. On the one hand I was changing the quality of my life but I was being eternally frustrated by the system. Now I respect the system and I look at the liberal ways of the UK market and wonder how people can work that way.'

Happily, the lifestyle in France more than makes up for the intricacies of French bureaucracy. 'The quality of life overcomes all that,' says Guy. 'When I get older or think about retirement maybe I'll want to go home but at the moment I live at the gateway to Europe and if I want to spend an evening in London, I'm 20 minutes from the Tunnel and can be there within 3 hours.'

As the best of both worlds, it's hard to beat. ❖

## Fact file

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