



THOMAS & BERTRAND CAROLINE JONES

A GRAPE-FILLED TRAIL LEADS TO *DOMAINE ROUGE-BLEU*

By Carolynne Kauser-Abbott

Even for a princess-bride, dreaming up this fairytale girl-meets-boy encounter could be a stretch. Two co-workers met for the first time as their Eurostar train rocketed through the French countryside on the rail tracks from London to Paris. Their weekend in France's Champagne region, as guests of Krug and Dom Pérignon, was the beginning of a long-distance romance.

Caroline Jones, who hails from Western Australia, is now married to French native Thomas Bertrand, the same fellow who caught her eye on that fast-moving train. In what some might consider a risky roll of the dice, they recently purchased a vineyard in France's southern Rhone region. In reality, this acquisition may seem a little less reckless once you understand that Caroline and Thomas both have rich backgrounds in the wine industry.

At 24 years old, Caroline first experienced juice-stained hands while assisting in the grape harvest in France. She worked her way from the vine fields into more complex vineyard roles, from cellar hand to the vintage winemaker. Through her career, Caroline has been able to blend her early exposure to Australia's progressive winemaking methodologies with the time-honored approach rooted on French soil.

Thomas and Caroline now own and operate Domaine Rouge-Bleu in Provence, located not too distant from the legendary Châteauneuf-du-Pape cellars. I was curious why they would even consider buying a vineyard that produces a wine called Lunatique. Caroline is clear in her response.

"I think it's a great name for a wine, with a touch of humor. It refers both to the lunar cycle with which we farm, following the

principles of biodynamics, and also to what was a slightly mad idea to make the wine in the first place. Lunatique is a special parcel of 100-year-old Grenache vines located at the far end of our Indication Géographique Protégée (IGP) land, on an ancient riverbed – entirely made up of large, smooth stones like those of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but white in color. The grapes from these vines initially went into our Dentelle IGP range until it was realized just how special they are, and thus Lunatique was born!"

From my exchange with Caroline, it is obvious that this couple is deeply familiar with their profession, from the green shoots on the vine stocks in the spring to the corked and labeled wine bottle, and every step in between. They have also chosen their production area with careful attention to detail. Caroline spent many years working harvests in different grape-growing regions around France, from Bordeaux to Banyuls and Gigondas, but she fell for the charms of Provence. She was seized by the same spell that captures so many tourists a year: the fabulous climate, outstanding food and refreshing wines.

Their purchase of Domaine Rouge-Bleu was well-researched; Caroline had personally handled the sweet fruit as one of the team members for the 2010 harvest at the vineyard. A little like their fairytale first encounter, this vineyard has just the right balance of criteria to fulfill this couple's dream of making wine in France. The property is of moderate size at just over 22 acres, and the old vines have been tended following a biodynamic philosophy. In addition, few could argue with their choice of geographic location near the shores of the Mediterranean and kissed by rays of the bright Provencal sun.

Thomas and Caroline's story reads a bit like a whimsical novel until

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you consider the reality of running a small, weather-dependent agricultural business, in a foreign language. Undeterred, they are clear that their philosophy is to work in harmony with nature to produce wines indicative of their terrain. Domaine Rouge-Bleu follows a biodynamic methodology, where they use low-sulfur doses in the final wines, well below those permissible by biodynamic law. Their goal is ultimately to make wines that they enjoy drinking themselves.

The couple bought the existing vineyard from a winemaker-owner who had carefully nurtured the old vines of Grenache, Syrah and Carignan to produce fruit of exceptional concentration and depth of flavor, although limited in yield at 25,000 bottles per year. Their vision is to make incremental improvements to the vineyard, winery and wines by drawing from their mutual industry experience and years between the vines. In the future, they hope to grow their existing export markets – United Kingdom, Australia and the United States – as well as venturing into new territories such as Sweden and Canada.

One might think that a physically-demanding business venture in a new country would be enough for a young couple to tackle. Not this twosome. They decided to add a three-bedroom bed and breakfast (B&B) into the mix. This is a place where recently-renovated, spacious rooms are named after grape varieties – Grenache, Syrah and Roussanne – and offer up views of the vineyard directly from your comfy bedside. Caroline and Thomas now welcome guests all-year-round into their warm, Provencal-style farmhouse where a traditional French continental breakfast might just be served under the Mulberry tree – weather permitting.

This pair is fortunate to be able to follow their passion, something many of us never quite sort out. However, I was curious about Caroline's experience as an expat so many miles and time zones away from her native Australia. Caroline studied French in school, and the deep history of Europe intrigued her. However, she was 21 before she first stepped foot on the European continent – hooked by the diverse landscape of

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France, from coastlines to mountain ranges, from plentiful farmland to enchanting cities. She was spellbound by the accessibility of fresh seasonal produce available from only a few miles away, and hooked by the hundreds of artisan cheeses and buttery croissants.

Caroline says she probably will always consider herself an expat and a proud Australian. Despite having studied French in school, speaking like a local is something Caroline recognizes she may never fully achieve. Although this clearly marks her as not 'from here', she likes the fact that she is just a little different.

Being married to a Frenchman has helped ease some of the archetypal frustrations with settling in a new homeland. Even mountains of French paperwork in a country that still loves its forms in triplicate, and countless hours spent on the telephone for routine domestic and business matters have not sent Caroline running back to Australia. Her recommendation for anyone relocating to a new country is to find a native speaker or agency willing to assist with navigating the daunting list of local medical professionals, bureaucratic requirements and potential frustrations with household infrastructure and utilities.

During the sometimes nippy, damp, Provencal winter months, Caroline admits that she misses friends and family, especially when she imagines that they might be enjoying lazy days at the beach and smoky barbecues. From time-to-time, sensory-induced recollections of

gum-tree-filtered light, aqua waters of Olympic-sized swimming pools, and cravings for vegemite draw her thoughts back to her homeland.

According to Caroline, expat life is not suited for everyone. You need to be ready for a challenge and prepared for the unexpected to arrive, in a new place. She recommends taking the mental approach that you are embarking on a unique learning experience complete with potentially astonishing outcomes. After all, who wouldn't dream of living among sun-ripened grapes in a vineyard in the south of France? ■

