



Left: Students enjoy a cooking course with Ian

Right: The couple transformed the property into a home and a business

The magic ingredient

The promise of a lifestyle centred around family and food convinced chef Ian Fisk and his wife Sara to settle in Dordogne, and they couldn't be happier with their choice, as *Vicky Leigh* finds out

When two people have two very different ideas about something as important as a lifestyle change, it makes it all the more interesting to find out how they came to be where they are. And, of course, whose idea won. In this case, it turns out it was the husband of the couple in question, but fortunately his wife seems just as happy with the outcome.

After working in South America for a number of years, Ian and Sara Fisk were excited at the prospect of returning to the UK to raise their son Adam, then aged two, but quickly realised that it wasn't the right place to give him the upbringing they had imagined.

"We wanted to give Adam a lot of our time, and the independence and freedom we both enjoyed as children, but soon became disillusioned as we realised we'd both have to stay in our corporate worlds in order to be able to provide that for him in the UK," says Sara, a former insurance broker.

As the couple were no strangers to life as expats, and with plenty of time to think about it before Adam

would need to start school, they began to consider a move to Europe. While Spain was on the cards initially they soon turned their attention to France and when they hit upon Dordogne, everything fell into place.

"It wasn't until we came to Dordogne in 2004 that it all came together for us," explains Sara. "We'd found somewhere we really wanted to stay and bring up our family." For trained chef Ian, it was the abundance of fresh local produce in particular that made a big impression.

"With my food background, the amazing ingredients and the lifestyle here, which revolves around family and food, really hit home with me, and it was the perfect fit," he says. "For me it was love at first sight, and if I could fall in love with the area in cold, dark January I knew it was going to be absolutely incredible in spring and summer."

A MEETING OF MINDS

So far, so good. They both talk about Dordogne with such enthusiasm, it's clear they were both on the same wavelength about the location from the outset, which leaves me wondering where their ideas differed. It soon becomes clear when we move on to discussing the house they eventually bought.

"My original plan was to buy a small property to renovate, learn the language, and see if it was something we enjoyed doing," explains Sara. "My idea," says Ian, "was to buy the biggest property we could, sink every cent we had into it and



Ian and Sara Fisk

spend the rest of our lives making it work. I managed to get my way!"

Some 35 property viewings later, the Fisks found Le Chèvrefeuille, a large, Périgordian farmstead in St-Cyprien, which had the potential to be the family home they wanted to create and the base for the new business venture they hoped to start.

Daughter Alice arrived during an ambitious renovation project to transform the building into a home and guest house, and they now have five bed-and-breakfast rooms plus two self-catering gîtes.

"It's a big property and there was a lot to do - and 13 years later we're still doing it!" laughs Sara. "We've done a lot of the work ourselves to keep costs down and it's been a gradual process to renovate each room. There's always something to do and you always want to do more to make it better and better."

Guest facilities include an outdoor swimming pool with stunning views over the valley, a communal barbecue area and an honesty bar, and bikes are available to borrow. Ian and Sara have made sure that there's plenty to keep children entertained, with indoor and outdoor games and a TV room, not forgetting the Fisk family animals, which include chickens, guinea pigs and Bella the cat. There's a horse-riding centre next door offering lessons and pony trekking too. The Étang du Bos water park is just a 10-minute drive away, while the Étang de Tamniès, a man-made lake with its own sandy beach, can be reached in 20 minutes.

CULINARY INSPIRATION

Phase two of Ian and Sara's plan involved the creation of a cookery school at Le Chèvrefeuille and the couple opened Cook Dordogne in 2012, allowing Ian to realise yet another dream. Inspired by the local ingredients that attracted him to this part of France in the first place, Ian teaches courses based around the region's specialities from the farmhouse kitchen. The courses are taught in English and appeal to a wide range of international visitors, particularly those from America and Australia.

"I'm very hands-on with the cookery school and I really enjoy the teaching aspect," says Ian. "We offer family courses too and that's my real passion - encouraging children to try duck or even just a simple tomato, and getting them involved and excited about food and cooking."

With his menus revolving around the Périgord Noir staples of duck, foie gras, truffles and walnuts, Ian takes a lot of his inspiration from his 95-year-old French neighbour, who is always happy to answer any questions he has about preparing traditional dishes.

"She is inspirational in her simplicity and the seasonality of her food, which is something I think has been forgotten in the UK," says Ian. "When asparagus season starts here we eat it pretty much every day, and once it's finished we move on to the next thing. What a fabulous way that is to shop. You



Above: Ian makes the most of the fresh local produce in Dordogne



Left: Market tours are now part of the cookery school's offering

DID YOU KNOW?
The farmers' market in Le Bugue has been running since 1319, and in November that year the King of France ordered that the market always be held on a Tuesday. This act is still in force today and Le Bugue's market has become one of the most popular in the region



Ian explains some of the more mysterious ingredients on offer at the market



The results of a productive day in the kitchen

STARTING A BUSINESS IN FRANCE

- AFE (Agence France Entrepreneur), the national business start-up agency in France, offers advice and information – visit afecreation.fr
- Your local Chambre de Commerce can provide you with invaluable information about the market in your area, regulations, tax and social security matters – visit cci.fr
- Local business advice centres are called *boutiques de gestion* and support the creation of some 18,000 businesses every year – visit bge.asso.fr
- The registration of a new business is carried out at a business registration centre, called a Centre des Formalités des Entreprises (CFE)

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know where you are in the year by the vegetable, and you have to fit in with the seasons. We really want to do that."

Ian also gives food demonstrations and the cookery school's offering has evolved to include market tours too. Ian accompanies his students to the market in nearby Le Bugue and St-Cyprien so that they can see first-hand the vast array of colourful produce available in this part of the country, and explains some of the more mysterious ingredients. Tour participants can enjoy samples from various stalls, meet the farmers and learn how to choose the best seasonal ingredients with which to create a range of French dishes.

"Our guests would often come back

from the market confused and unsure what to do with some of the produce they'd seen, which gave us the idea for the tours," he explains. "We realised people wanted someone to go with them and hold their hand a bit, and I've built up a good relationship with the stallholders as a result as well."

LIVING THE DREAM

The connection with local producers and their shared passion for the food of the region has helped Ian and Sara to integrate into their new community, as have the children and their school-related activities. The couple have picked up French as they've gone along, while Adam and Alice are both bilingual. ▶



When Ian and Sara discovered Dordogne, they knew they'd found the right place

“Our children are totally independent – they wander off and come back when they’re hungry, and that’s how we grew up”

“Seeing how they switch between French and English is incredible, they don’t even think about it now,” says Ian. “I’m so envious. I remember saying to my French teacher at school, ‘what is the point of learning French? I’m never going to live in France so I’m never going to need to speak it’. What a mistake that was!”

Ian enthuses about the “brilliant environment” they have brought their children up in, and it certainly seems as though the move to France has allowed Ian and Sara to give Adam and Alice the sort of upbringing they had in their minds. Neither of them can imagine returning to a life in the UK and they have no plans to leave France, especially while Alice, now 10, is still at school.

“Our children are totally independent – they wander off and they come back when they’re hungry, and that’s exactly how we

grew up,” says Sara. “The business has taught them to be polite, open-minded and socially aware; they have great social skills and they’re bilingual – what more could you want?”

Sara and Ian are thoroughly enjoying the benefits of their life in France too, and have no regrets about their decision to move to Dordogne.

“It’s definitely met our expectations,” says Sara. “We don’t commute to work and we’re here all the time with the kids. Ian is really into cycling and he’s able to go out and do that every day. He’s developed an interest in foraging too and wants to devote time to learning more about it.”

Ian is equally enthusiastic. “For me, it’s like hitting the jackpot,” he says. “The first few years were tough but the last three to four years have been incredibly good. We’re more established now and know what we’re doing, and I’ve learnt that you have to do things in life to please yourself. At 4pm in an afternoon I go out on my bike and have an hour of cycling because it’s so important to me that I do that. It takes a while to get to the point where you can really enjoy it, but we’re all very much at that stage now, and we want to be here for a long time.”

That sounds like a recipe for success that many others would happily follow. **LF** lechevrefeuille.com



CHAMBRES D’HÔTES AND GÎTES

To be classed as a *chambres d’hôtes*, accommodation must not exceed five bedrooms catering for no more than 15 guests. All *chambres d’hôtes* must be registered with the local *mairie* and if you plan on offering an evening meal for guests they must eat the same meal as you and your family at the same table (*table d’hôtes*), otherwise you could be classed as a restaurant.

It is generally agreed that you’ll need at least three *gîtes* to make it viable to rely solely on them for your main source of income. You’ll also need to consider the additional facilities you’ll need to offer your guests, and ways to make money from your *gîtes* in off-peak seasons.



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