

My new chapter
‘Age and experience are a real advantage’

When Sally Evans retired from corporate life at 50, she had no idea that her passions for renovation, hospitality and wine would lead her to create the award-winning wine tourism venue Chateau George 7 in Bordeaux, France.

Working as a marketing director for a global consulting company in Paris and Nice for 16 years was a real corporate job. When I had my youngest son, I went back to work when he was two and a half months old, but when he reached the age of 14, I realised I’d really not seen him grow up due to all the travel I’d done. So, I decided to quit my job to spend time with him before he went off to university while I renovated a house in the south of France and looked after my ageing mum.

Two years later, when the time for my son to leave home was getting closer, I naturally started to think, “What’s next?”. In April 2014, as a single 52-year-old, I began to explore several avenues, including teaching English in Thailand, but soon realised I wanted to remain close to home for my family. I’d also started studying WSET (Wine and Spirits Education Trust) wine courses because I felt ashamed by my lack of wine knowledge after living in France



Chateau George 7 in Bordeaux, France, which Sally (right) set up.

for so long. It wasn’t long before I started looking at all the different threads that were running through my life. Having worked in education and hospitality previously, I realised that I was very much drawn to renovations,

entertaining, teaching, and wine, so I started to think about moving to the iconic wine region of Bordeaux to renovate another property and continue with my wine studies – and that’s exactly what I did!

WORDS AND IMAGES: SALLY EVANS.



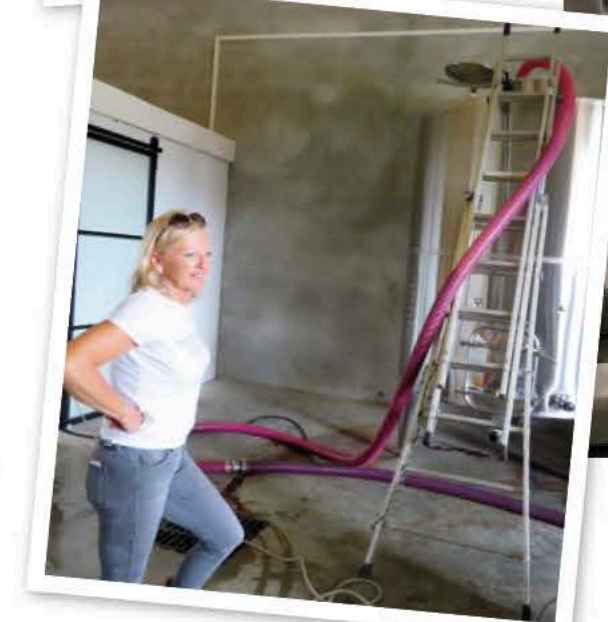
CULTIVATING A NEW LIFE

By March 2015, I'd started a two-year WSET diploma in wine and found a property in the village of Saillans, Bordeaux. It was a really dilapidated set of buildings with an old barn and an old winery but, crucially, the 35-year-old grape vines surrounding the buildings were included in the sale. With little experience of the wine industry, I let the previous owner use the vines for free, so I didn't have to worry about the fruit while I got on with the renovations. I also volunteered for my neighbours, got practical winemaking experience, networked and started to make friends, which I don't think I would have done if I'd been in a couple. When the house was completed a few years later, I asked myself, 'Am I going to make wine or not?'. At 55, I realised I might never have the chance again, so I decided to give it a try in 2017.

I found two people to work with me as consultants, but it wasn't plain sailing. We lost almost the entire harvest to frost in my first year, and the few grapes we had left made just

400 bottles of wine, which is very little. Thankfully, I had my first real crop in 2018, but because I owned three hectares, which makes around 15,000 bottles of wine – and I would have to buy the equipment and barrels and build the barrel rooms to store that much wine – I decided to make 9,000 bottles that year and rent out the other vines. This also helped to bring in a little income when nothing else was coming in, because the process of making a complex wine takes years, and I still didn't know if my wine was going to be any good.

In April 2019, I didn't have a finished wine, but my consultants told me it was a stonking vintage because the soil was so good and the climate in 2018 was perfect for grape-growing. So, when I took my first wine to be tasted by experts in Bordeaux (in case anyone wanted to buy it in advance), I burst into tears when a famous critic gave it 91 points. The wine merchants, Davy's of London, also asked if they could import it into the UK, which was amazing because it would have been difficult to sell that wine during Covid without them. And I couldn't have



Sally had to learn the wine business from scratch, with no prior experience, so had to be hands-on with every aspect of the winemaking process.



Sally harvesting the grapes on the three hectare vineyard.

been happier when the same vintage scored 94 points in a worldwide wine competition (the Decanter World Wine awards), because while 91 is great, 94 is superb!

In January 2020, I decided to renovate the tractor barn into a tasting room and tourism venue, which has a beautiful terrace overlooking the vines. Unfortunately, we couldn't open in April 2020 as planned due to the pandemic, but we did open in July, and the following year we won a Best of Wine Tourism Gold Award. As an accredited Bordeaux wine tutor, I host lots of tours for press and overseas visitors, and people are always fascinated by my story and how a British woman ended up making wine

in Bordeaux with no prior experience. It sounds like something out of a film, and I'm working on the fictional story of my life right now, so you never know... although I'll have to spice it up a bit as I don't think my love life is exciting enough!

AGEING WELL

What I've achieved might sound a lot, but I did everything step by step and brought all the skills I'd learned in my previous life into this one. So many visitors tell me I inspire them to transform their lives in midlife, but then say they don't know how to go about it. So, when my mum passed away in January 2024 and I had to stay locally to sort everything out, I decided to channel everything I knew into a book. I wrote *Make the Midlife Move: A Practical Guide to Flourish After Fifty*, to help guide and inspire

others to take the leap and have confidence in their abilities, because age and experience can be a real advantage when you're making a life change and trying something new.

I try to get across several key messages, including the fact that you need to be very honest with yourself about why you want to change your life and what is driving you. Is it because you're lonely? Or because you feel you're running out of time to achieve your dreams? Or you need more money? Or because the kids have left home, and you feel free for the first time? You don't need to have all the answers, but you've got to enjoy the journey as much as reaching the destination.

People ask me all the time if I want to grow my business further, but my measures of success now are different to when I was in my 30s when it was

about getting the next promotion and buying a bigger house. Instead, I want to do the things I love, and at this stage of life, I think it's very important that we go at our own pace. I may well sell the vineyard at some point, but in the meantime, I'll enjoy the fact that I can sit down with my friends and enjoy a bottle of the wine I've made. There's a lot of pleasure in that.

Make the Midlife Move: A Practical Guide to Flourish After Fifty by Sally Evans, is available on Kindle (£4.99) and from Amazon (£10.99). For information on visiting Chateau George 7, or to buy Sally's wines, visit chateaugeorge7.com.

