

Time for a brew

The Loire Valley has proved to be the ideal location for an expat mum to run a tea room and for one couple to start brewing beer. **Lauren Howells** finds out how they did it

Famous for its skilled chefs and delicious local produce, France is the perfect place for expats who dream of setting up a business specialising in food and drink. For Kate and her husband Eric, who run a tea room in one of France's *monuments nationaux* and brewery owners Hannah and Anthony, moving to France has enabled their dreams to become a reality.



“I would advise anybody who sets up a business to do the five-day business set-up course at the CCI”

KATE COULON

Le Teapot tea room | Nohant, Indre

When ex-primary school teacher Kate and her French husband Eric made the decision to move their family over to France 12 years ago, it was a matter of now or never.

“We didn’t see much of each other or much of our children,” Kate reveals. “Moving to France has enabled our children to have a childhood like I had – time outside, climbing trees, making camps. They’ve had space to grow, fresh air and quality of life.” When the family made the move, Kate decided to be a full-time mum but her dream of opening a tea room was never far from her thoughts.

So when a friend contacted her in



March 2016 to say that a tea room had shut down at one of France's *monuments nationaux*, the Maison de George Sand, which happened to be only 500 metres from her house in Nohant, she acted immediately.

To her dismay, she discovered that the deadline to apply to become a tenant had already passed.

Luckily, only one other party had applied, so she was given a chance to put her ideas across.

By the July of the same year, Kate had opened Le Teapot, which is now open five days a week (or six days in July and August) from April until October.

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Rather than paying rent every month, Kate is able to pay a percentage of her takings, which is perfect for a seasonal business.

Kate encountered a number of difficulties when it came to setting up and registering the business, as she didn't really fit into a category. Le Teapot couldn't be registered as a *salon de thé*, as only those who have the relevant *pâtisserie* qualifications are allowed to register under this category.

Neither could it be a restaurant, due to the building being part of a national monument, which means she cannot use a naked flame or hob.

In the end, Kate was able to register as *restauration rapide* under the *micro-entreprise* regime, which means she can ‘transform’ food but not make anything from scratch. Her husband Eric, who was a chef, helps out with the food and is registered as a *conjoint collaborateur*.

“There were lots and lots of barriers, but luckily I was with the CCI (Chambres de Commerce et d’Industrie) and they did everything for me. They helped set up my business legally. Without them I would have been completely stumped. I would advise anybody who sets up a business to do the five-day course regarding setting up a business. It costs a bit of money but it’s worth it.”

It was also necessary for Kate to do a food hygiene course and more training in order to obtain an alcohol licence.

Despite these hurdles, Kate has made a huge success of Le Teapot, where she sells scones, cakes and a range of savoury salads and other dishes, including a wonderful melting goat’s cheese on toast. The restrictions on what she can make have enabled her to buy in a wide range of

Kate wanted to create a traditional tea room offering local specialities



KATE'S TOP TIPS

- Research, research, research. Make sure that you are allowed to do what you are planning.
- Do the five-day business set-up course at the CCI.
- Ask as many people as possible who have already done it – find a mentor if possible, as it is a bit of a minefield.
- Don't be impatient – it does take months and months to get things up and running. Everything takes time so be prepared. You will need a buffer cushion of cash.
- If you need qualifications, check you have the right ones.

delicious local produce to sell to her customers.

“We try to keep things traditional, so when tourists come they can taste the local speciality. We sell *pâté de pâques à la berrichonne*, which is like pork pie in a strip with an egg inside and *pâté aux pommes de terre*, which is a potato and cream pie,” Kate says.

“We try to keep it fresh, as low mileage as we can possibly get and if we can't source it locally, then we try and keep it regional. We get salads and fruit and vegetables from the lady in the village who is a market gardener, and we get our goat's cheese from a farm in the village.”

The wine is sourced locally too, from Châteaumeillant (known for its wonderful ‘*rosé gris*’), Valençay and Reuilly.

As Le Teapot is part of a national monument which welcomes around 35,000 visitors a year, Kate hasn't needed to do much publicity.

Running the tea room has really helped Kate to integrate and with the majority of her customers being French, her language has improved enormously.

“I have been doing all the service, so I have had to immerse myself and get on with it,” she says. ▶

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“Ninety-nine per cent of our clients who buy our beer are French. You can’t have a business just for British people if you need to earn money”

ANTHONY AND HANNAH JONES
Brasserie du Luma | Orsennes, Indre

It was the French language which initially drew Anthony and Hannah Jones to France. “I was studying French in Abergavenny while breastfeeding my third child because I wanted to go to university,” Hannah explains. Her husband, Anthony, had other ideas. “I remember, he said, ‘Sod that, if you want to learn French, let’s go live in France!’” she tells me, laughing. And that’s exactly what they did.

During a Christmas break in 2000/2001 in the Indre-et-Loire department, the couple found themselves in a job centre, where they spotted someone advertising for a tree surgeon. By March the following year, Anthony had started the job and they had found a house to rent in the local area.

Hannah, who had been a nurse back in the UK, began work as an auxiliary

nurse in the local community. “I was so well accepted. It didn’t matter about my language or lack of language, they could just see I could do my job,” Hannah recalls.

Eighteen months later, both Hannah and Anthony started working as estate agents for a local company. When the financial crisis hit in 2006, they decided to diversify.

Over the next decade, the couple ran a number of different restaurants specialising in home-made food, including a restaurant in local tourist hot spot Gargilasse-Dampierre.

Brewing beer was always at the back of their minds. “We had to decide if we wanted to get bigger and employ people - us being useless with paperwork - or go smaller. And we actually wanted to start brewing eventually as well, as part of the



These pages: The couple originally planned to brew kegged beer for their bar, but when customers started asking for their beer in bottles, they started brewing on a much larger scale. Last year they brewed some 20,000 bottles of beer

home-made thing,” Hannah explains.

However, the couple admit that things haven’t always been easy for them. “If we could have bought a house in Britain, we would never have come here,” Hannah confesses. But their determination to make it work in France has led them to where they are today.

When Hannah and Anthony started looking for their next venture, they originally wanted to buy a pub, restaurant and brewery all in one. However, not able to find what they wanted in Berry, a former province which crosses the Indre, Cher and a little of the Creuse departments, they eventually settled for buying two separate properties: a restaurant and a separate house for them to live in, with a barn for the brewery attached.

Two years ago, with no previous brewing experience, they purchased brewery equipment from someone in a neighbouring department who was looking to retire.

HANNAH AND ANTHONY’S TOP TIPS

- Learn French. If you can’t speak French, you will struggle to get the business.
- Don’t rely on the British market for your products.
- Be ready to diversify if necessary.

The couple run the business under the *micro-entreprise* regime, but Anthony says that whether you can brew beer under this business structure can vary from department to department.

Unfortunately, due to trouble with her back, Hannah was unable to continue cooking at the restaurant they bought, so they now rent this out.

“The plan was, we were just going to brew kegged beer for our bar, brewing once or twice a month,” Anthony reveals. However, when customers started asking for their beer in bottles, the couple started brewing on a much larger scale.

In 2017, the Brasserie du Luma brewed 20,000 bottles of beer, with Anthony having to work seven days a week in order to meet the demand.

Twenty shops in the local area, plus a theatre in Châteauroux, now stock their beers but Hannah admits it wasn’t easy to get business at the beginning. “It was horrific at first. I’m shy. But now it’s just so



easy - people are coming to us and saying ‘I want to stock your beer?’”

“Ninety-nine per cent of our clients who buy our beer are French,” Anthony adds. “You can’t have a business just for British people if you need to earn money”.

With the brewery business doing so well, the couple have recently purchased four new, much larger tanks for their beer. In their busy periods, they brew twice a day. Add on the bottling, kegging, local markets and deliveries and they can be very busy indeed.

Anthony and Hannah are currently in the process of creating a courtyard for *dégustations* in the summer. “People are curious and even though it’s tiny, they want to come and buy beer off us and see the brewery,” Hannah says.

The couple do not regret their decision to start a new life in France, despite all of the ups and downs over the last 17 years.

“I feel at home here,” Hannah tells me. Their business and involvement in their local community over the years definitely seems to have helped them to integrate.

“If you get involved and get to learn about French traditions and culture, it is beautiful. I feel ‘Berrichon’,” Hannah says, referring to the local area. “And people who are Berrichon and who have known me a long time, treat me as if I am.”

Santé to that.  facebook.com/brasserieduluma

