

HomeOverseas

Tommy Barnes, fed up with commuting to a dead-end job, moved to France and set up a brewery, with no experience. What could possibly go wrong?

It was a classic, grey-on-grey British November day in 2012. The Tube was damp, cold and busy – people sneezed in each other’s hair. Then I realised I’d been doing this journey almost every day for 15 years on my way to work as a second-rate graphic designer at a large faceless organisation. It was time to plan an escape.

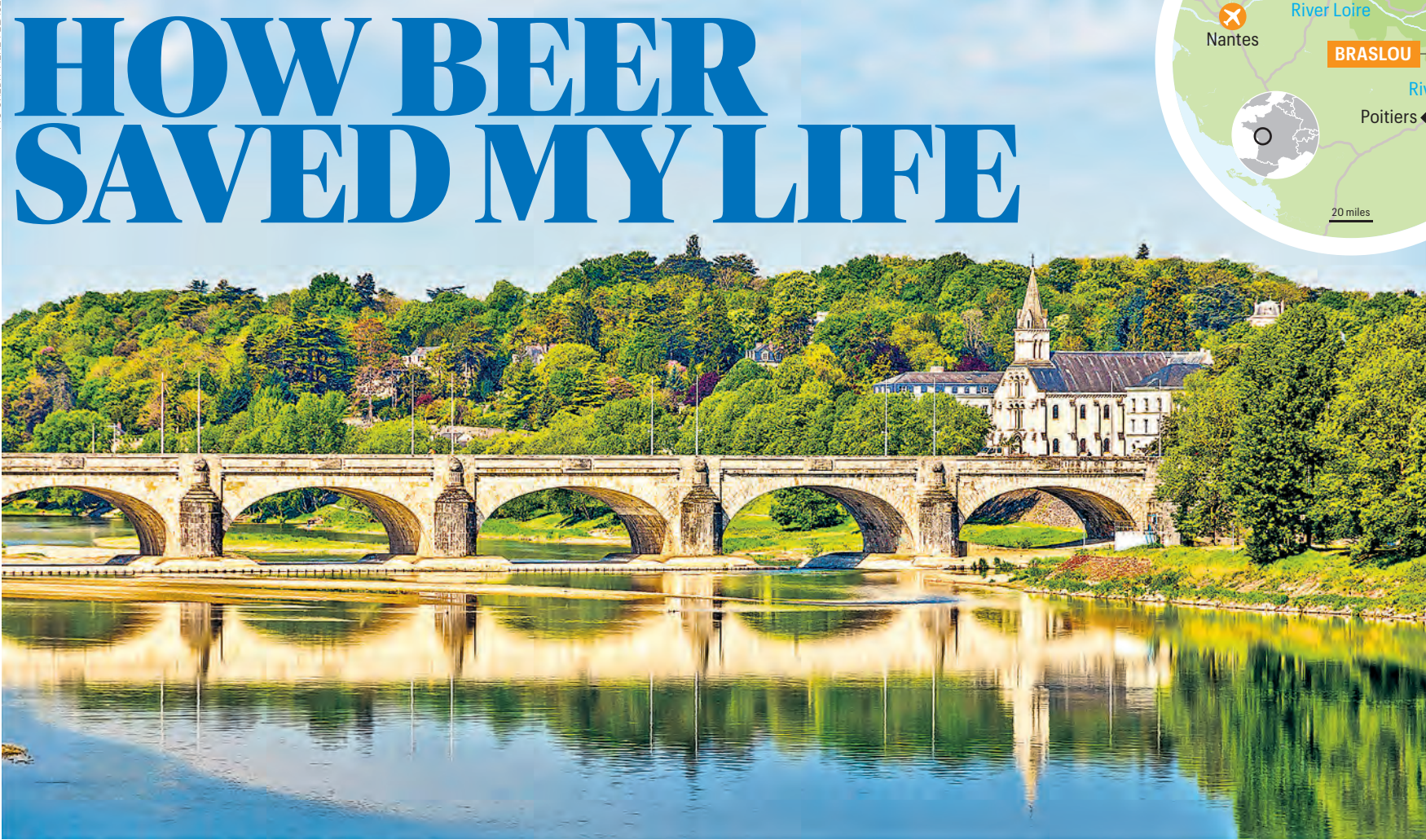
It took three years, but eventually my girlfriend, Rose, a ceramicist, and I managed to make ourselves redundant, and we set off for France. We both had memories of childhood holidays in hot cars laden with unimaginably smelly cheese on everlasting journeys down autoroutes to campsites where ferocious ping-pong battles ensued. Also, France was different enough to be new and exciting, but close enough to home that family and friends could easily visit. More important, you could get a lot more for your money in rural France than in London.

I remember telling people I was going to start a brewery,

but I don’t think I had any intention to. It was just something to say. What I really wanted to do was write a bestselling comedy murder-mystery novel and spend the rest of my life in a white linen onesie, gurgling the finest red wine and smoking cigars while floating on a unicorn lilo in a swimming pool shaped like a flamingo.

We began our tour in the Indre-et-Loire department, in central France. We were met with gentle hills quilted in forests and striped in vineyards; wide, shallow rivers that flitted between medieval towns; and glorious chateaux. I’d found a property to rent in a village called Braslou.

La Ruche is a *maison de maitre*: a tall, symmetrical, dignified old house built with large blocks of white tuffeau limestone. Three elegantly carved mansard windows are spaced equally across the black slate roof, with three windows across the first floor and two large windows either side of an imposing front door on the ground floor, flanked by



La vie est belle Left, Pont Wilson, on the Loire. Above, Tommy, his wife, Rose, their son, their neighbour Damien and his family. Tommy’s brews include Clifton Porter, Berger Blonde and Cardinal IPA



advice. And spend everything you earn on piña colodas.

It’s only a slight exaggeration to say that the move to France saved my life. Indeed, I think I’ve lived more in the past three years than I did in the previous two decades. There have been wonderful times: the arrival of our boy, Albert, and another baby imminent; the success of a business we built from nothing; timeless summer nights barbecuing slabs of bavette on old vine wood; sun-burnt canoe trips down the River Vienne; and, most of all, loads and loads of cheese, wine – and beer.

Then there have been hard times when money was short, trees blew over, babies were crying and I was being tormented by my nemesis, Burt the dog.

People sometimes say I’m brave to do what I’ve done, but I’m not sure that’s true. There are two sorts of people who leave the comfort of a steady job and move to a different country, learn a different language, start a family and try to make a new career. There are brave people – who think through all the pros and cons, realise the risks and do it anyway. My wife, Rose, is brave. Then there are people who don’t give it any thought

at all. People who just think: “It will probably work out fine.” I am one of those idiots. As far as I can see, it seems to be working out fine.

It’s a given that the French think any Englishman is insane in anything they do. Trying to start a brewery in an area known for wine probably didn’t help. I think a lot of people around us assumed the brewery would fail. It wasn’t that they wanted it to, it was more that trying to make any business a success in rural France, where poverty levels are reasonably high and there’s a constant drain of young people to the cities, is tough.

Now I think the locals are proud to have a brewery in the neighbourhood. We feel we have been accepted into the community, although I am resigned to the fact that I will forever be referred to in the third person as “the English”.

Damien still helps out whenever he can. To this day, he has never asked for anything in return – probably because he has seen my DIY skills. He does, however, enjoy a draft or *deux*.

A Beer in the Loire by Tommy Barnes is out now (Muswell Press £12.99); brasloubiere.com

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great bushes of rosemary and mint. So when the owner, Mishi, phoned us to say it was for sale, we threw whatever remained of our savings at it and bought the beautiful house there and then for a touch over €200,000.

When it became apparent that my debut murder-mystery novel was beyond awful, I moved to plan B. My brewery. In the name of research, I felt much tasting was needed. When the hangover subsided, I got to work with a little homebrew kit that I bought from the internet. It was the smallest, cheapest, most basic brewery I could find, and my neighbour Damien helped me install it in one of the barns. Indeed, my brewery is called Braslou Bière because I wanted it to be something for the village.

I then made every mistake a brewer can make, because the fundamental flaw in my plan was that I had no idea how to actually make beer. After a year or so, the brews got better. I now have four beers – Cardinal IPA, Biscuit Ale, Clifton Porter and Berger Blonde – and I sell them in the local farm shop and at fetes. I supply several bars in the area for €2.50 a bottle, or six for €12. With everything considered, it has probably cost me about £30,000, and that’s before you take into account buying bottles, labels and so on.

I have never done a business plan or calculated my costs or projected profits. Sensible people say you should do all that, but they are so dreadfully boring. Don’t listen to boring people. That’s my business

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