

Food for thought

When Katie Bromilow decided to swap life on the seas for dry land she chose to put down roots in the village of Tourrettes-sur-Loup in Alpes-Maritimes, where she works as a private chef. **Vicky Leigh** tells her story

As a student in England, Katie Bromilow decided that one of the things she'd like to do was learn French, so when she finished her degree she set off for France to work on a barge on the Burgundy canals. Centred in Auxerre, she would travel up and down the region's canals cooking for clients from all over the world.

"I was very much learning on the job and that's where I decided that cooking was something I really wanted to pursue as a career, so with the money I earned in France I paid for a course at Prue Leith's Cookery School in London," explains Katie. After completing the course she went on to cook in various different jobs, but her experience on the barge in Burgundy had given her a taste for life on a boat.

"This time I thought I'd like to try a sailboat, although with no previous experience of this kind of work, I didn't really know what I was getting into, but I got a job and that's where I started to cook professionally," says Katie. This marked the beginning of a six-year stint on the seas, during which time she honed her skills while travelling around the Mediterranean, sailing around the Greek Islands, Corsica and the south coast of France. She would often spend winters in the Caribbean and summers on the east coast of America, but when she met her future husband, a yacht skipper, it was time for another change.

FEET ON THE GROUND

"When we got married I wanted to live ashore, so we started looking at where would be best for us," says Katie. "It was complicated because we both had family in England and at that time the yachting industry there wasn't as big. We did look there and also in Spain, but we ended up in the south of France because leisure yachting was such a big industry, and it



also meant we'd be close to an international airport in Nice."

Katie already spoke some French when they arrived and having a knowledge of both the language and the country certainly helped when it came to settling in. "I come from a family of Francophiles and we used to go on camping holidays in the north of France when I was growing up, so I didn't feel I was in an entirely foreign country, and having a base to start from in terms of the language meant that fluency came quite quickly," she says.

The couple bought a property inland from the coast in Tourrettes-sur-Loup, a *village perché* in the beautiful Loup valley backed by a range of hills. Their choice of



location paid off as they both found work. Many of the people Katie had cooked for on the sailboats owned second homes in this part of France, and so she began working as a chef in private residences.

"For the first couple of years I didn't have a rhythm as this type of work is very seasonal, but bit by bit I managed to get jobs that dovetailed together all the way through the summer from about Easter until October," says Katie. "Most of the people I work for are clients I've worked with for a very long time, but every year I try to do a couple of dinners for new clients because that keeps me on my toes. Cooking for people is a very nice thing to do because they're very appreciative and that's really lovely."

The fresh local produce provides Katie with plenty of inspiration for her cooking, and she also likes to introduce influences from other cuisines such as Asian and Thai as this sort of food suits the warm climate of the south of France.

The clients she cooked for often wanted to learn how certain dishes were made,

Katie also runs cookery classes from the property that she and her husband renovated in 2006

and she would give them a cookery lesson in their own kitchens, which gave her the idea of running classes in a kitchen that had been designed for such a purpose.

BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

When their elderly neighbour, who they'd known since they first arrived, passed away in 1999, the opportunity arose to purchase her house. As there was no one to inherit the property it was left to two charities, so Katie and her husband made them both an offer and although it took a while, they managed to buy it in 2003.

In 2006 they began to carry out the necessary renovation work, and as the house had been empty for some time there was a considerable amount to do, including work to the roof.

"I said to my husband that what I'd really like was a nice kitchen, but I didn't want stainless steel and white tiles everywhere as I wanted it to be a comfortable home too, so we installed a very nice kitchen that works well for both," says Katie. The house has two bedrooms upstairs and the large kitchen downstairs, and is used for Katie's cookery classes as well as providing handy guest accommodation when family and friends come to visit.

"The majority of my work is still cooking in private homes, but offering the cookery classes is very rewarding as an additional thing to do," says Katie. "It's

"There isn't anywhere else that we love as much as here"

very satisfying to help other people and give them information. There are so many things you can teach yourself in cooking, but there are a few little things that can help if someone gives you some extra tips."

Many of her clients naturally want to learn more about Provençal-style cooking as they're keen to add this dimension to their stay in this part of France, but the classes are all custom-designed to meet individual requirements based on what they want to learn or achieve. The yachting industry here also means that she often teaches groups of young people who need to do intensive cooking classes, which she finds particularly enjoyable.

"A lot of people just want to do a day's course, have lunch and enjoy the surroundings," says Katie. "Some find that it's too hot to be in the kitchen all day, especially in the summer, and by the end of the morning I often find they're drifting towards the French windows! I usually aim to break for lunch and then we come back into the kitchen to make a dessert."

LOVING LIFE

Choosing to put down roots in this part of France was the right decision in terms of the lifestyle it has afforded them too. The peaceful surroundings and proximity to the coast provide them with the best of both worlds, and while Katie's husband enjoys the fantastic cycling opportunities on the doorstep (a lot of professional cyclists come here to train), they both love to hike in the surrounding hills, often going out for three or four hours at weekends or whenever they can.

"There's such a diversity of landscapes along this stretch of coast and we got very lucky when we came here," says Katie. "The dream French lifestyle - the idea of wandering down to the bakery to pick up a baguette and enjoying a *café crème* in the square - is very much a reality in Tourrettes-sur-Loup."

They often say it's a case of being in the right place at the right time, and this has certainly turned out to be the right place for Katie. After 26 years here she can't imagine living anywhere else.

"We've been very happy here and wherever we go we always return happy that this is where we based ourselves," says Katie. "It has all the things that interest us - the yachting, the cooking, the pleasure of going walking together. This feels entirely like home and there isn't anywhere else that we love as much." **LF**

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