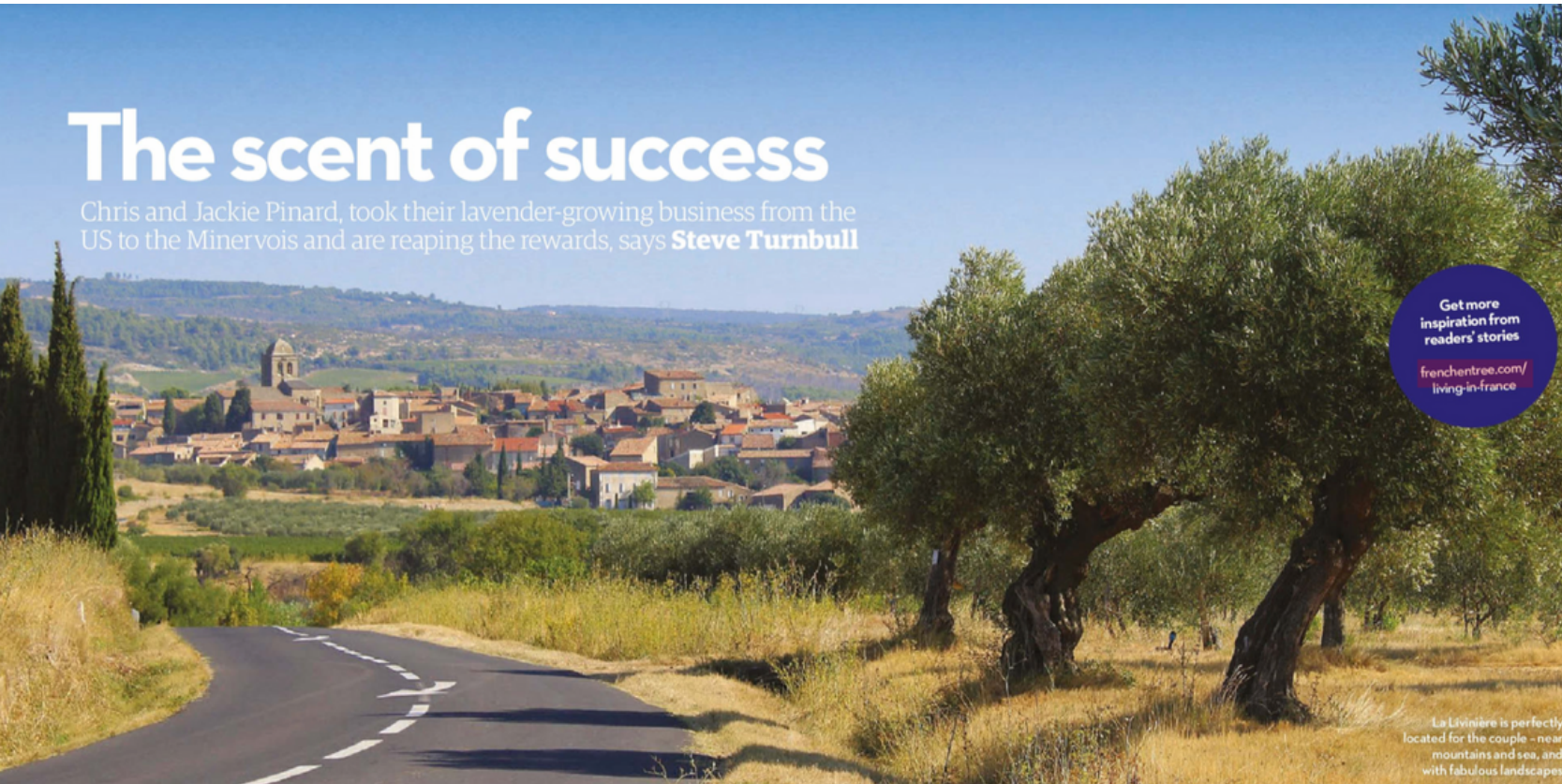


The scent of success

Chris and Jackie Pinard, took their lavender-growing business from the US to the Minervois and are reaping the rewards, says **Steve Turnbull**



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La Livinière is perfectly
located for the couple - near
mountains and sea, and
with fabulous landscapes

Did you know there are over 400 varieties of lavender? Chris and Jackie Pinard certainly do, because they cultivate over 100 of them on their land. Basically, what they don't know about this aromatic and medicinal plant, isn't worth knowing.

Lavender may be emblematic of Provence, which mainly grows high-yield varieties, but the Franco-American couple have staked out their own ground in the picturesque La Livinière. This village feels lost in time and lies in the foothills of the Montagne Noire, north-east of Carcassonne, at the heart of the beautiful Minervois region that spans the Hérault and Aude departments. The area is best known for its medieval history (the Cathar village of Minerve is just down the road) and winemaking.

Although born locally and brought up in the Haute Vallée de l'Aude, near the Pyrénées, Chris branched out in a different direction. As a

young adult he moved to South Carolina in the US, and later qualified as an alternative medicine practitioner, using a range of methods including massage and aromachology (the influence of scents on human behaviour). He then met Jackie, a paediatrician, and together they decided to set up South Carolina's first official lavender farm.

POLITICAL REFUGEES

The business was successful, however, after several years they began to feel increasingly alienated by the Trumpian political climate. Chris also felt a yearning to return to his French roots and they both wanted to live a simpler and more meaningful life closer to nature. So, in 2017, straight after Trump came to power, the 'political refugees' took the brave decision to up sticks and headed to France. They've never looked back.

But what led the couple to La Livinière? As Chris explains, the village is ideally situated



Chris and Jackie harvest the lavender themselves using saw-toothed sickles

close to the mountains and the sea, with lots of local fruit and vegetable producers, fabulous landscapes, and a rich flora and fauna. Idyllic as this sounds, the couple had to work very hard to turn their dreams into reality. They completely renovated their own house in the village and did the same with another nearby, turning it into a wonderful gîte, which they named Casa Lavineira. 'Casa' is old Occitan for house, and 'Lavineira' the medieval name for the village.

Surprisingly, given the stereotype of soul-destroying French bureaucracy, the process of setting up their new businesses was much easier than in the US - and it's been the same with the tax returns. They've also been able to access valuable advice and support for free from local agencies.

Their businesses are called Senteurs du Minervois and Zen Minervois. The former offers a line of beautifully packaged wellbeing products, which Chris and Jackie sell online

and via their market stall. The range includes essential oils, hydrosols and candles, all of which are 100% natural, without preservatives or dyes.

Central to the production process is a large copper still. This set the couple back the hefty sum of \$5,000, but it's where the magic happens. Dried bunches, or 'bouquets', of lavender are added to the stiller basket and the still is partially filled with pure water from a nearby mountain spring. The heat is then turned on, and after about 45 minutes the hydrosol (lavender-scented water) and essential oil blend begins to condense, cool and collect into a glass flask called an *essencier*. It then splits naturally (the oil floats to the top of the hydrosol) and is decanted into two separate containers. The whole process takes two and a half hours.

The best thing to do with the lavender hydrosol in the heat of the summer is chill it in your fridge and spray its fine mist on your face - blissful!

"Central to the production process is a large copper still - this is where the magic happens"

It's also great on your pillow to aid a relaxing sleep. In fact, the word lavender comes from the Latin *lavare* meaning to wash, and there is growing evidence to suggest that its oil - used extensively in ancient times - may be an effective medicament in the treatment of several neurological disorders.

HARVEST TIME

The hardest part of the production process as a whole is the harvesting. Depending on the weather (another challenging consideration) this is usually done in June when the lavender is in full bloom. The couple work their small plot surrounded by dense scrubland (or *garrigue*) by themselves, using saw-toothed sickles (*faucilles*) to slice through the stems. The lavender is then bunched and tied for drying.

Like vines and olive trees, lavender is a very hardy

plant that thrives in the hot Mediterranean climate. But, as Jackie points out, too much water (they don't give theirs any) will kill it. Which is just as well given the record-breaking drought in France during the summer of 2022. The couple also harvest other plants in the wild including fennel (*fenouil*) and bay (*laurier*). Plus, with nearly two hectares of land in total, they cultivate over 60 varieties of rosemary (*romarin*). But lavender makes up the bulk of their production.

Their sister business, Zen Minervois, complements Senteurs du Minervois perfectly. In a wonderfully calming space decorated with his professional-looking photographs of the local area, and a hand-carved 'tree of life' artwork, Chris applies the massage and therapy skills he learned in the US. These are customised to the client and



Chris and Jackie distil their own lavender oil and sell it online and on their stall



The couple grow more than 100 varieties of lavender at La Lavinière



Clockwise from main: the welcoming dining room at the couple's gîte, Casa Lavinière; teaching visitors about olive growing on a talk given as part of their work with the Florir association; Zen Minervois's energy and massage room

informed by what he believes to be sound principles: energy healing doesn't come from beliefs or the call of spirits, but is based on scientific quantum physics theories, and the fact that humans are bioenergetic beings. It's a hands-on system that utilises 'universal energy' to assist others in healing physical and emotional issues.

The fundamental aim of this approach is to leave the recipient feeling 'recentered, rebalanced and rejuvenated'. Sceptics may scoff at the New Age sound of all this, but Chris comes across as a well-balanced, intelligent individual. He also tells the convincing story of a local

rugby player who came to him on crutches, thanks to a twisted and badly swollen ankle, and after just one session walked away with no pain.

LOVE FOR LIFE

As you'd expect of someone who lived and worked in the US for many years, Chris speaks fluent English. He also has an endearing accent that blends South Carolina with the south of France. Equally charming is his obvious love for his new life shared with Jackie (she keeps in touch with her family in the US via the internet and returns there from time to time) and his passion for their business. "Our little endeavour

is just one small step towards teaching others about simple and natural ways to feel better and to respectfully reconnect with nature and oneself, as well as contributing to the liveliness and the economy of our village. We now offer experiences and retreats geared towards nature lovers and the wellness-conscious.

"We also arrange wine tastings with our winemaker friends who are passionate about natural winemaking. We offer free tours around our lavender fields for the guests staying with us in June and early July too."

As if all this wasn't enough, Chris has developed a treasure



Clockwise from main: the entrance to Casa Lavinière; the gîte is a relaxing place to enjoy wellness retreats; Jackie outside a capitelle

"We want to teach others about respectfully reconnecting with nature and oneself"

hunt-style, self-guided tour of the village (downloadable from their website) with his historian friend, and two walking trails. One, Le Chemin des Oliviers, is designed to promote the olive culture of the village, and the other to showcase an 800-year-old cade (juniper) tree. Both feature numerous capitelles (stone huts) that are typical of the area, the richly biodiverse environment that surrounds La Lavinière, and acres of vines. On a clear day, you can also glimpse magnificent Mont Canigou and the Pyrénées in the distance.

BLOOMING GREAT

In addition, the couple have set up an association called Florir (Occitan for 'blooming') with other likeminded friends from the village. In August 2022, they held their first event, A l'Ombre des Oliviers (In the Shade of the Olive Trees), which offered several workshops (ateliers) including Chinese medicine and Hatha yoga. This being the south of France, there was also an aioli competition. The main aim of

the association is to promote the natural and cultural heritage of La Lavinière as a wellness destination.

It also reflects Chris and Jackie's eco-spiritual values. As Chris says: "I believe a close relationship with nature is essential for us all as it provides roots, energy, authenticity, true values, health, food and homeostasis (the process by which living systems retain stability). In a society that generally promotes deceit, lies, obsolescence and superficiality, nature grounds us and helps us be better beings as well as good stewards of the world around us."

Chris and Jackie have ambitious plans to further develop their enterprise. With Senteurs du Minervois, they want to produce more varieties of essential oil and extend their line of products. They are also planning to create a micro-nursery that will specialise in Mediterranean climate plants (hence the many varieties of lavender that they grow) and a botanical/healing garden similar to the one they had

in the US, along with a small wedding venue.

With Zen Minervois, Chris wants to develop his clientele and offer different types of "one-of-a-kind nature-related massage and healing experiences". Finally, with Casa Lavinière, the couple want to create a "truly customised and highly individualised approach" to their wellness retreats, in partnership with Zen Minervois.

So, with their service and holiday-based businesses flourishing, the couple are really enjoying the scent of success. But equally important, they have made a strong connection with their natural environment and community in the Minervois.

As Chris says: "Life is really good here, and we love helping people make it even better!" It goes to show, following your dreams is never a bad idea. ■

To find out more about Chris and Jackie's eco-wellness endeavours, visit senteursduminervois.com and zenminervois.com