

SHARE A *glass*

British-American Caroline Conner left behind wine distribution to run wine tastings from a studio apartment in Lyon, and life has never been better, as *Brigitte Nicolas* learns

I speak to Caroline in-between her making a quick trip to the cheese shop before it closes for a French lunch hour, and a tasting for two that she has booked in for the afternoon. She always serves a bit of cheese and meat with her tastings, she tells me, and would usually pick up her cheese at the market that is just steps away from her apartment, but, as her usual sellers are away on holiday she went elsewhere. She also has to clean her bathroom and take a trip down to her wine cellar to collect that day's wines. This is what it takes to put on English-language wine tastings in Lyon, and she loves it.

THE FIRST SIP

Self-confessed wine nerd Caroline Conner was born in the US but her wine education began intensively in a blind tasting club at the University of Oxford while she was studying archaeology and anthropology.

It wasn't the wine that first caught her attention though. "I joined one of the wine societies where I thought the boy running the fresher's fair stall was cute," she says.

"It was this posh wine club that wasn't really my scene, but what turned out to be my scene was competitive blind tasting, which was uber-nerds sitting around a table arguing about wine."

During her time in the club, Caroline tasted around 20 wines a week, competed in an Oxford vs Cambridge tasting competition and later on started teaching newer members what she had learned.

"Basically almost everything I learned about wine I learned then, which is crazy," she reflects.

Caroline did go on to formalise her skills, however, attending a culinary school and then getting a level 4 WSET - a well respected qualification in the wine business in the UK and internationally. She also worked in the food and wine distribution industry in London, Paris and San Francisco. Ultimately, though, she found it wasn't the life for her.

"I got the qualification, the WSET diploma when I was a young woman aged 25, and it has just been years of sort of justifying the fact that I know what I am talking about," she says.

GOING SOLO

Starting her own wine-tasting business in France was a way to change this. Her relaxed and informative sessions now attract Americans and Brits, as well as some visitors on holiday from Germany and Sweden who can understand more English than French. She shares her knowledge with her groups but she is no longer selling wine, instead she is focused on offering a good experience.

"My wine-tasting customers are happy to be here," she says. "They chose to be here. I don't have to fight to be heard which is amazing. Working alone can be hard, obviously, as everything is on me, but I get to do whatever I want, I don't have anyone questioning me and saying that I don't know the things that I know. And that is awesome. I am very happy being a solo entrepreneur."

Caroline had been living in America for a couple of years when she decided to make the move to live in Lyon via Paris in July 2017. ▶



Above: Caroline's table can fit eight people for an intimate and educational wine experience

Right: Vieux Lyon and former silk production neighbourhood of La Croix-Rousse

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WINES OF LYON

Caroline's Wines of Lyon tastings cover a few important local wine areas, and she always provides something to nibble on as well...

Burgundy

A prestigious category of French wine, it is well known and encompasses 84 internationally recognised *appellations*. Burgundy wines are often priced higher because of this notoriety.

Beaujolais

Found just south of Burgundy, Beaujolais is a favourite of the Lyonnais. It is always made from the gamay grape and can be light, fruity and fresh.

Northern Rhône

The Rhône wine area is divided into north and south, and it is in the south – where syrah and viognier grapes are royalty – that the most prestigious wines are found. These include Hermitage and Condrieu.

Côteaux du Lyonnais

A small wine area in the hillsides west of Lyon, that borders the Beaujolais region.

TODAY'S CHEESE

"Saint-Félicien is a really special cheese, it's a raw cow's milk cheese. It is a little smelly and it can be really, really runny but it's delicious," says Caroline.



Caroline Conner has a level 4 diploma from The Wine & Spirit Education Trust

"My Dad was between London and Paris, so initially I was on his couch. It took me a few months to move and get all my stuff over from America," says Caroline.

LOVE AT FIRST VISIT

Lyon and the historic La Croix-Rousse neighbourhood on the outskirts of town had captured Caroline's heart from her first visit there.

"I came to Lyon to study French for two weeks and to see friends in the mountains. I had heard it was cool but when I came here I just thought 'oh wow, this is where I want to be'," she explains.

"I knew I wanted to be in this neighbourhood because it's very pretty, it's very villagey, there's a food market every day, which is awesome. I like going to the same cheese people every day, and I like the way that the French, particularly in my neighbourhood, have managed to really keep community alive," she says.

It was her Dad who convinced her to buy a property when she was struggling to find a place to rent in the area.

"My Dad actually said, 'why don't you buy, it's really good value compared to Paris and London', and so I did and it was kind of a crazy decision. But once I decided I wanted to buy, it was easy."

COSY APARTMENT

Soon enough, she found herself signing the papers to buy a snug studio flat in one of La Croix-Rousse's charming buildings. "It's a 19th-century silk factory," says Caroline. "This whole neighbourhood was built between 1800-1850 to house the Jacquard silk works, so it's very historical and very typical of this neighbourhood - except for the fabulous renovation I've done inside!"

The apartment is an open studio with a mezzanine bedroom and it is in this compact space that she also hosts her wine-tasting sessions, which brings its own challenges.

"I live in a cube. We have a couple of mirrors upstairs and people think they are doors but they're not. It's a studio and you can see my bed from the table I do tastings at," says Caroline.

"I have a toilet downstairs - that is for my clients, and then I have my own bathroom upstairs so they don't have to see my shampoo," she continues.

"Other than that, I have nowhere to hide anything; you can see everything in this apartment, which is interesting. I have to be cleaner than I have ever been in my life!"

But she has no plans to move the

classes elsewhere, in fact it works well for her style of tastings.

"People love it. It's fun, it's such an expression of who I am and it's a great place to hang out," she says, adding:

"I want it to be small and intimate. Only eight people can sit at my table. If you get more than that you can't move and people can be rowdy. I really want it to be an educational experience. I want people to feel like they have the room to ask questions, and if you have too large a group, people are going to get lost."

LOCAL VINEYARDS

The tasting sessions are each set up with a theme. Caroline's favourite is 'Wines of Lyon' in which she chooses a selection of bottles produced within a two-hour drive of the city and highlights the differences between each one.

"We do a comparison. Today I am going to show about seven wines from five areas, I have got Côteaux du Lyonnais, Beaujolais, Savoie, Rhône and Burgundy. There are other people here that do winery visits, but then you visit just one vineyard and you do one thing and it's not as dynamic, I don't think."

The particular choices of wine do vary with each class and she usually decides what to serve the night before.

"I am going to serve some pretty funky bubbles today, just to start, because I feel like it. I have a range of different bottles in my cellar in the building's basement - it's not a sexy cellar," she notes, "it's a terrifying nightmare cellar, but it works."



Caroline's studio apartment has a mezzanine bedroom

"I have some wonderful winemakers that I visit frequently"

Recommendations from friends in the industry, as well as Caroline's own knowledge and contacts from her time working in distribution, help her when selecting the right places to buy high quality wines from.

"The people that I am interested in connecting with are the winemakers. I have some wonderful winemakers that I visit more frequently than others. And that is really, really delightful."

Once she has a winery in mind it is a case of paying a visit to taste what's on offer and choose particular bottles.

"I don't buy a lot," she says, "I don't need a lot of wine. I can get enough for a good 10 people out of a bottle."

Caroline is looking forward to Lyon's *Fête des Lumières* in December, which she expects will be a busy period for her.

"There are light installations all over the city. They project onto all the old buildings, and it's a really fun time to visit," she says enthusiastically.

But next order of business, as we hang up the phone, is her afternoon tasting followed by a wine and music event hosted by Northern Rhône *appellation* Crozes-Hermitage, where Caroline will get to see some winemaker friends and share a glass with them too. **LF**

winedinecaroline.com



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