

A WARM WELCOME

For **Adrian Blackmore** Château de Villette is a gem in the heart of Burgundy with a driven shoot that has conservation at its core



At the heart of the Morvan National Park, which was created in 1970 to preserve an area of just over 1,000 square miles of beautiful, unspoilt, countryside in Burgundy, lies Château de Villette. Built on a site that has been occupied for over 2,000 years, the Château is a perfect example of neo-classical French architecture, and it was in need of complete renovation when Coen and Catherine Stork bought it 23 years ago. Now, it is the most beautiful and comfortable place to stay in Burgundy, with one of only a handful of driven shoots in France that attracts guns from all over the world. There are many marvellous comments in the Château's visitors book, and one describes it perfectly as "a very special place, it's a jewel".

Although there had been a successful wild partridge shoot at Villette in the 1960s, everyone in the area had been using the estate as a free-for-all for shooting prior to it being taken on by Coen and Catherine. The absence of any birdsong on their first morning was startlingly noticeable so they immediately started planting hundreds of trees, several miles of wide hedges and created generous headlands. Whilst the government initially contributed to the cost of a gamekeeper to control predators and report poachers, subsidies stopped once the shoot became commercial, but by then the numbers of wild partridge, along with many other species, had increased enormously. It is now possible to see rare black woodpeckers, hoopoe and an abundance of songbirds.

The extensive woodlands surrounding the Château are made up of ancient oaks, native hardwoods, Douglas fir, spruce, and larch. Clearings have been created to open-up the canopy, with new skylights attracting all nature of wildlife. Having initially made commercial development plans for the timber, Coen and Catherine were subsequently allowed to switch to a system that created a natural habitat that boosts wildlife and gamebirds; one of the few estates in the region to have this new method of management approved by the French Forestry Commission.

The shoot also experimented with a new cover crop that was recommended by Charles Williams, a renowned horticulturalist and owner of Caerhay's Castle Estate in Cornwall where he runs his own highly successful shoot and whom Coen had met whilst shooting grouse in Northumberland. Rather than maize and sorghum, Charles suggested miscanthus, or elephant grass as it is more commonly known, which is a perennial that provides wildlife with great protection from the cold. Although the climate in Burgundy is very different from that in Cornwall – and there was some doubt as to how successful it would be – they gave it a go. Despite losing the first year's crop due to extreme heat, it eventually took root the following year, drawing gamebirds in like a magnet along with an abundance of other birds and animals, including boar and deer that also took advantage of the dense cover it provided. Steven Baird, Villette's extremely dedicated gamekeeper from Northern Ireland, could not have been more delighted. During the nine years that he has been at Villette, Steven has transformed



the drives, and implemented changes that Coen had at first thought impossible. The highly professional team of pickers up, and the enthusiastic and friendly team of local beaters, are also thanks to him.

A variety of drives

At Villette, day-old pheasant and partridge chicks, and ducklings, that have been bred in France, are reared in barns, before being moved into pens around the estate prior to being released. The foundations of the shoot are built on simple principles: ethical, ecological, and hospitality. Days are for eight guns with no more than 250 bird days being offered; and everything that is shot is taken by the guns, those loading, beating or picking up on a shoot day and local restaurants. There are now a total of 19 drives with typically four to five drives being shot on a shoot day, with guns walking between each drive.

And what drives they are. Those such as Sanglier, Poil and Chevreuil, to name but a few, are predominantly for partridge, with birds flushed off sloping banks over the line of guns below, whilst some of the excellent pheasant drives include Kennels, Battue Wood, and Chateau. High Seat is another, a large circular clearing one half of which is a high wooded ridge from which the birds come soaring overhead, and all these, along with two extremely exciting duck drives, make for some spectacular sport.

As the shoot developed, so too did a demand for loaders, something that was in somewhat short supply

in the Morvan. Coen therefore approached a group of local farmers who agreed to give it a try, and he arranged for Roddy Richmond-Watson and Mark Heath from the West London Shooting School to run a two-day training course for them at Villette. Although they were initially horrified at the thought of having to wear a tie when loading, their dread of doing so was overcome when one of their wives tied them so they were ready to loop over their heads. All they had to do was tighten them!

Culinary delights

Those shooting at Villette stay in the Château, where they are treated as friends of the family. Although the dress code is formal, Coen and Catherine have a very relaxed way of entertaining which is centered on good food, fine wine, and fun. And it is certainly all those. Coen is Dutch, and one of very few non-French judges for one of the longest established wine competitions, the Concours National de Vins Macon, and Catherine is Belgian and a highly accomplished cook who treats guests to true culinary delights. Along with Angeline and Marca, their marvellous French housekeepers for whom nothing is too much trouble, one can be assured of the most perfect sporting weekend.

Château de Villette is truly a world-class shoot, and one that is all about the small rural community in which it is situated, with everyone having an important part to play. Modelled on the very best that an English shoot has to offer, it is indeed a jewel. 🍷