

I quit the rat race for a corking new career

Pictures: ANDY SCAYSBROOK

When **ALISON NIGHTINGALE** gave up a high-flying job to open her own vineyard, she never dreamt she would win awards for her wines

LIFTING the glass to her lips, Alison Nightingale took a deep breath. She was about to have the first taste of wine made from grapes grown on her very own vineyard. She had planted them herself, nurtured them through the seasons and now, finally, she was about to sample the fruits of her labour. But she needn't have worried. As soon as she tasted the dry white wine, she knew she was on to a winner.

And luckily the wine world agreed with her.

Although she only started producing wines two years ago, Alison has beaten more than 300 other entries to the accolade of English Wine of the Year 2015 for her 2014 Bacchus at the industry's annual national wine awards.

"I've always enjoyed wine but had no idea that I might one day make my living from it," she says.

Making the transition to award-winning vineyard owner and wine maker has meant huge lifestyle changes.

As a marketing executive based in Singapore, Alison travelled all over Asia and Australasia with her then-fiancé, now husband Nick, 47.

"It was a work hard, play hard kind of lifestyle," says Alison, 49.

"During the week I would work punishing hours and was forever running between business meetings in my high-powered suits.

"Then at the weekends I would want to make the most of my free time so I would go swimming, play tennis with friends or would visit Angkor Wat or the Philippines."

Alison had the best of both worlds and loved it – for a time.

But when the couple's oldest daughter Amelié was born in March 2002, that all changed.

Having been given just three months' maternity leave, she was forced to hire a full-time nanny.

Over the next year she wanted to be at home more and in 2003 the couple moved back to their tiny flat in Fulham, London.

When she fell pregnant again, the couple decided to escape the rat race once and for all.

"We wanted to move somewhere more child-friendly with space and a garden," says Alison. Freya was

born that September and the family moved to Hurstpierpoint in Sussex the following month.

As Nick continued to work in the oil industry, which involved lots of international travel, Alison looked after the girls.

"The village was a lively place to be but still a friendly community and somewhere I could easily push a pram," she says.

Yet as the girls grew, Alison needed more stimulus.

"I was looking for a career that would fit around my family."

She looked at lots of options, but she kept coming back to wine.

"I'd always enjoyed good wine. When living in Singapore we'd take advantage of long weekends and visit small family-run vineyards in Australia and New Zealand."

She saw this as her chance to pursue something she loved and enrolled on a four-year part-time degree course in vine growing and wine production.

"At first it was an interest. I thought, at best, I might one day manage someone else's vineyard. But it grew to be a passion."

She got a BSc (Hons) viticulture and oenology degree and as the girls grew more independent – Amelié is now 13, Freya is 11 and their sister Megan is eight – Alison started dreaming of running her own vineyard.

Yet with few established

vineyards available in the emerging British wine-making industry, that meant starting her own from scratch. She just needed to find the perfect spot.

"The site had to be right for us as a home as well as a business, with barns for the winery, the tasting room, lab and storage," she says.

"Also, to be commercially viable, we needed to plant between 20 and 30 acres.

"We spent two years searching throughout Sussex, Hampshire and Devon. We looked everywhere but nothing worked."

THEN a local farm came on the market and the couple viewed it the

very next day.

"It was perfect, with 110 acres on a south-facing sandy slope – excellent for vines which need good drainage," says Alison.

The couple bought the farm in October 2009.

"But the wine-growing calendar meant we had to plough the field in September, before we had even bought the property, so it would be ready to plant in May 2010.

"Luckily we persuaded the farmer to let us plough early."

Safely installed in their new home, which they renamed Albourne Estate, Alison had sleepless nights wondering if she

had made a huge mistake.

"Although I felt the land was right, you never know until you pick the first grapes," she says.

"The time lapse between planting the first vine and selling the first wine is seven years for sparkling wine and four years for still wines."

She planted different varieties including Bacchus vines, which grow well in England and produce a crisp, white wine.

"Planting 41,000 stick-like vines was backbreaking work," says Alison, who had to learn to drive a tractor and operate other farmyard machinery.

After dropping the girls off at school each morning she'd put in long hours pruning the vines, often working until dark.

As the warmer months hit and her vines began to grow, Alison worried about frost.

"A late frost in April or May can damage delicate buds so as the temperature dropped I would be ready to rush out and light the bougies – special vineyard candles which create just enough heat and draught to protect the vines."

Harvesting her first crop in 2013 was equally fraught.

"As those first precious grapes finally ripened I worried about pests damaging my crop."

Friends and family helped pick the grapes for that harvest.

Tasting that first wine, her mind ran through every potential

problem. "But deep down I knew it was good," says Alison.

She entered her first vintage in the UK Vineyard Association's English & Welsh wine of the year competition and won silver and bronze awards.

Soon her wine was stocked at South Down Cellars in Hurstpierpoint, followed by hotels across Brighton.

But it was her 2014 Bacchus that really put her on the map when it won Wine of the Year at the UK Vineyard Association's national wine awards and Alison became one of the few female wine producers to win the title.

"One of my key aims at the outset was to produce the best Bacchus in England and to help put Bacchus on the map as the quintessential English wine.

"I have no regrets about turning my back on a high-flying career to live on this beautiful estate, being there when my girls need me and throwing myself into my vineyard."

"Nick has even started his own brewery on the estate.

"It's been a long hard road but it's been worth it. I love what I do."

● Alison runs tastings and tours of the vineyard on selected Saturdays throughout summer, at £15 per person, and sells wine at the farm gate and online. Bacchus retails at £12.95. Visit albourneestate.co.uk

Interview by CAROL DAVIS



CHEERS: Alison has no regrets about leaving her high-powered job to make her own wine