

À LA MAISON

This month: How one couple transformed a 19th-century château into a luxury B&B; try a recipe for *tarte aux abricots*; wines to match and gardening in France



It was love at first sight when Dutch couple Siebren and John Demandt-Boon saw Château des Tesnières nestled in the lush Brittany countryside. With backgrounds in antiques dealing and interior design, the couple were able to use their eye for design and natural sense of style to transform the 19th-century château into a luxury *chambres d'hôtes*. Siebren and John have skillfully married the original features of the château with modern comforts, and furnished it with items brought with them from Amsterdam, as well as interesting pieces from local *brocantes*, to create a home they describe as "classical with a modern twist".

Read on for more about Château des Tesnières 

KINGS OF THE CASTLE

A grand château in Brittany captured Siebren and John Demandt-Boon's hearts and they have worked hard to transform it into a luxury, stylish *chambres d'hôtes*.

Emma Rawle finds out more

Moving from a city-centre apartment in Amsterdam to a grand château with 15 acres of land in the heart of Brittany was certainly a big leap into the unknown for Dutch couple Siebren and John Demandt-Boon, but it has proven to be one of the best decisions that they have ever made.

In 2001, Siebren and John had reached a point in their lives when they needed a change. They lived in Amsterdam; John was an antiques dealer and Siebren was a marketing director at a retail company, but they were growing tired of the pace of city living and were yearning for a bit more space and freedom.

France seemed the obvious choice for the couple, who had been holidaying there, both

As chance would have it, the château was put on the market four months later, but enquiries revealed it was far out of their price range. Nonetheless, the idea had taken hold, and after much research on the internet, the couple drew up a list of 11 châteaux for sale in western France and embarked upon a property-viewing trip.

Starting in Normandy and working their way down to Dordogne, Siebren and John visited all 11 châteaux, but it turned out to be the second one that stole their hearts – a grand 19th-century château in Ille-et-Vilaine. However, they weren't about to rush into anything, as Château des Tesnières was in an area of Brittany

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together and separately, for many years.

"We have friends who had a holiday home in Normandy and we visited them maybe twice a year," explains Siebren. "We always felt very much at ease, and we thought to ourselves: why aren't we buying a holiday home in France? It isn't too far away from Amsterdam and we really love the country."

They set their sights high when a stay in a Normandy château 14 years ago sowed the seeds of an idea that they just weren't able to get out of their heads. "We stayed in a château which was set up as a B&B and it was such a beautiful building. We said to each other: if this is ever on the market we are going to buy it. It was just a feeling we had," remembers Siebren.

they didn't know very well. An exploration of the surroundings revealed that it was a great spot – five minutes from the medieval town of Vitré, seven and a half hours from Amsterdam, an hour to the coast and ferry ports and three and a half hours from Paris.

"Then we realised for the first time that if we were to buy something like this, it would really change our life," says Siebren. "Initially, we wanted a holiday home and to spend six months in Amsterdam and six months in France, but we realised if you buy a big property like this, you can't just leave it for half of the year. And it would be ridiculous to have a big house like this for just two people and a dog!"

The couple took their time deciding what to



Siebren and John Demandt-Boon

do, not wanting to rush into such a life-changing decision, but they eventually decided to go for it – to buy the château, move to France full-time and set up a B&B, but not to sell their Amsterdam property for a couple of years so they had a safety net to fall back on if things didn't go to plan. Luckily they didn't need their safety net, and in 2006 they sold their Amsterdam house.

Built in the 1850s, Château des Tesnières was the summer home of a noble family until the 1970s when it was bought by a Parisian couple. They had renovated part of the property, adding in 20th-century comforts, so when Siebren and John bought it in 2002, it was in a habitable condition but not suited to their needs.

Although the décor was not to their taste, the couple didn't begin renovations immediately, as Siebren explains: "We moved in at the beginning of 2003, but we decided to do nothing for several months because we wanted to get to know the building and really understand what to do with it. We spent the summer discussing plans for the château – what we were going to do with it; how many guest rooms; where we were going to start; who we were going to hire and so on."

"We started renovations in September 2003, and we began with the top floor of the building, which was for the servants before the war," explains Siebren. "It hadn't been touched since and we decided to create four guest bedrooms and bathrooms. Afterwards, we moved onto the first floor and then the ground floor, although we didn't touch our private apartment for a few 



“I would call it a classical style but with a modern twist”

years. It was important to do the part that we could make money from to start with.”

This wasn't their first renovation project, as a few years earlier in Amsterdam, they had converted a property into apartments for foreign businessmen. Drawing on this experience and their backgrounds in antique furniture and interior design, they designed the entire renovation themselves, planning where each room would go and how it would look, and employed local painters, plumbers and electricians to carry out the work. Although more expensive than doing the renovations themselves, this meant the guest rooms were completed within a few months and they could begin to make money from their château.

“Our first guests arrived in March 2004,” remembers Siebren. “It was quite fast and we only had three finished rooms by then. We did the fourth guest room that year and then in 2006, we did our own place in the building and the kitchen, and we started to do something about the garden.”

The couple have kept all of the original features of the château – the parquet floors, the chimneys, the doors, the panelling – and added to them to create a stylish home, although they find it difficult to describe the décor.

“You can't say it's typical Louis XV or Louis XVI; it's really a mix of anything we like ourselves,”

says Siebren. “There's a lot of classical furniture and pieces of art but we also have a lot of modern things – modern comforts in the bathrooms and things like that. That's why I find it so difficult to describe! I would call it a classical style but with a modern twist.”

Siebren and John brought a lot of the furniture with them from Amsterdam but they have supplemented it with interesting pieces picked up at auctions, online and at the local *brocante* flea markets.

“When we bought the château it was empty,” says Siebren. “There wasn't anything here so we had to buy everything: all the lamps and the carpets and things. It's a big house so that was a lot of work, but that's the fun part of it! We're still looking for interesting pieces. Several years ago in an auction we found a 17th-century Italian *stipo* which is a kind of cabinet. It's now in the dining room and we love it. There's also a four-poster bed in the Suite du Comte guest room, which we found at the *puces* – a big antiques market held twice a year in Rouen. We find quite a bit there. We also have Dutch Queen Anne chairs in the dining room, which we find really beautiful – we already had them in Amsterdam.”

Although, the château renovation was completed in 2006, the couple keep revisiting rooms and are still changing things. Only a few

weeks ago, they restored a parquet floor that they found under the carpet in one of the rooms. “We look in each room once in a while and think: does this need something new? Last year, we renovated the rooms on the top floor again, but it's just redecoration. We are still buying things and changing the interior. It's an ongoing process; it never ends!”

Siebren and John have thoroughly embraced their new lifestyle in Brittany and, although they still visit Holland several times a year, they couldn't imagine leaving France. “We'll never go back to Holland on a permanent basis because we've got so used to it here – the freedom, the space. French country life is really great – the food is nice, the climate is nice, and we've made a lot of friends over here. And through the B&B we've met people from all over the world we otherwise wouldn't have met. We've even had guests that became friends.”

It's clear to see that Siebren and John have enjoyed every minute of their renovation project. They are proud to share their stylish château with friends and guests, and are planning to continue to do so for many years to come. **LF**

www.chateau-des-tesnieres.com

Siebren and John are offering a 20% discount to Living France readers booking two nights or more at Château des Tesnières – simply quote Living France when making your reservation.

These pages: Siebren and John have successfully married classic and contemporary pieces to create their own unique style in the château

