



Summer 2025 and three new products to taste: a vodka and two g n pis (Photo: Distilleries Saint Gervais)

Living the dream?

British brewers and distillers in post-Brexit France

BY ANTHONY GLADMAN

At 4,600 feet above sea level in the French Alps, James Abbott makes gin in a converted donkey shed. The building, constructed entirely from recycled materials, sits on Prarion Mountain in the shadow of Mont Blanc, western Europe's highest peak at 15,777 feet.

Solar panels power the lights, gas fires the two 100-litre copper pot stills, and when the frequent power cuts hit, Abbott simply carries on. It's a 35-minute steep hike from the nearest road, accessible by quad bike in summer and snowmobile in winter. This unlikely location houses Europe's highest distillery.

When grief opens doors

Had things gone as planned, Abbott would be flying planes over the Canadian Rockies. It was 2016, a year before Brexit negotiations even began, when the former teacher from Kelso applied for visas with his wife, planning to build eco-houses and pursue pilot training in a country he describes as

"10-15 years further advanced in technology in the building industry." They had six months to kill while their paperwork processed. "We just thought, let's go to the mountains and have some fun for a change," Abbott recalls.

Then tragedy struck. "My wife died shortly before I fully moved here," Abbott says. Suddenly facing grief alone, he decided to stay. "I suppose even though I hadn't turned down Canada at that point, I couldn't carry on working where I was because I was in a right mess. So I needed to come to the mountains anyway and sort my head out."

Alone in a foreign country with virtually no French – "I never studied French at school. It's still just as bad now, to be honest" – Abbott found himself grieving in unfamiliar territory. The response from local residents proved crucial. "All these locals that got to know me, they're the ones that helped me out," he says. "It's very strange, very humbling. If they didn't see me for a couple of days, they'd phone me or send someone up the mountain where I was living."

The community support accelerated his recovery. "I preferred to be on my own but to be honest I recovered a lot quicker because they never left me alone and they always looked after me and invited me to their houses." This intensive local integration would prove foundational to everything that followed.

Those dinner invitations became the foundation of Abbott's unexpected business. Unable to navigate French wine etiquette, he brought Scottish whisky instead. "I couldn't bring wine to a French family's house," he says. "After six months of them teaching me about wine and me making them drink whisky – in Scotland we throw the bottle top away and you have to drink the whole bottle before the night is finished – they were like, 'Wow, he's either making his whisky in the mountain or he's an alcoholic.'"

France is the world's biggest consumer of single malt whisky, and his neighbours' enthusiasm led naturally to conversations about local distilling. "We found out there were no distilleries in the area," Abbott explains. "Every Scottish drinker has been involved in a distillery at some point. We get dragged around as a child to a distillery when you can't drink the whisky. I used to guide on the west coast of Scotland, sea kayaking guiding. I loved all the stories about the whisky distilleries. After researching it for about six months, it was either give it a go or let it drop. It was after about a whole year of me being here in the French Alps that I decided 'right, let's give it a go.'"

Abbott's Scottish identity turned out to be business asset. When he began selling to high-end restaurants, he wore his Robertson tartan kilt. "It immediately smartened me up. I couldn't walk with my gin into these Michelin-star restaurants looking like a mountain goat," he explains. The kilt served multiple purposes – conversation starter, professional attire and crucially, cultural signifier marking him as distinctly not English.

From grief to gin

After a year of recovery and community building, Abbott faced a choice: pursue his original Canada plans or stay and create something new. The local support made the decision easier. When he approached the mayor about establishing a distillery, the response was enthusiastic.

Abbott knew the village of St. Gervais had recently reclaimed the



Tom Abbott's small distillery at 4,600 feet in the French Alps (Photo: Distilleries Saint Gervais)

Mont Blanc name from Chamonix. "I asked him if I could name the distillery St. Gervais Mont Blanc. He loved that. He knew the potential for tourism if it came to the village."

Setting up involved a lot of paperwork – which will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with France. Abbott had to obtain licences to buy pure alcohol, to distil, store and transport alcohol, plus separate licences for each of his stills. "You've just got to be patient and get through it," he says.

Luckily, he found support for this too. The region already had frameworks for small wine producers doing similar work and customs officials were unexpectedly helpful. "They even found a customs officer that spoke English for me which is amazing," Abbott recalls.

Abbott's real challenge emerged when his French business partner abandoned the project at launch in 2017. Flying solo without French fluency during his first commercial year, he faced a harsh business education. "It probably took me three years to learn all the skills that he was amazing at, which restricted my sales because I was struggling to get to French businesses to offer my product." This three-year learning curve meant his production capacity far exceeded sales capability until 2020.

The lesson was clear: "I would never advise anyone to do a business in France without speaking French," Abbott says.

His distillery setup reflects both mountain practicalities and sustainable principles. His two 100-litre gas-fired copper pot stills from Portuguese company Hoga run on bottled gas rather than electricity – essential given frequent power cuts. "I do three distillations from one of those bottles. That's three distillations for 30 euros, 35 euros. That's pretty good," he calculates. Solar panels power the lights and pumps for recycling condensing water.

Abbott adapted his gin recipe to suit French tastes. He says he took inspiration from the local *eau de vie* traditions. "I wanted my gin to be more a sipping gin so you can drink it without tonic, if you wish," Abbott explains. "I stick an ice cube with it, a wee zest of orange and I can drink it neat." This approach aligned with a growing interest in gin among French drinkers. This interest is driven by the cocktail scene, according to IWSR research, with consumers showing a particular preference for locally made gins.

Abbott's sipping gin appealed to French connoisseur culture, attracting prestigious endorsements. "I've been supported by all the top chefs in France. Anne-Sophie Pic is the top Michelin chef in the world. Emmanuel Renaut is the local top chef. They put it in their food and I've been on France 3, a major French TV channel, twice because of some of these chefs who put it in the food," Abbott says.

Crucial mentorship came from



Two 100-litre gas-fired copper pot run on bottled gas rather than electricity – essential given frequent power cuts (Photo: Distilleries Saint Gervais)

Tom Nichol, former master distiller for Tanqueray. Their collaboration produced Gin du Mont Blanc at 43.6% ABV – which Abbott says is a “small celebration” of their friendship because at the time Abbott was 43 and Nichol was 63. The professional guidance proved invaluable as Abbott developed his recipe and production techniques.

Scaling success

Abbott makes around 10,000 bottles annually from his maximum capacity of 50,000. These deliberately conservative numbers reflect both his small-scale philosophy and market realities. At €45 per bottle, his annual turnover covers operating costs and provides a mountain lifestyle, though “a lot of importers won’t touch me at the moment because I’m too small.” This scale limitation drives his expansion strategy: converting a restaurant cellar to house two 400-litre stills and five small stills for gin experiences, targeting 350,000-bottle capacity.

The economics shifted dramatically during COVID when Abbott’s limited distribution nearly killed the business. “I was really struggling because the government weren’t offering me support. I was falling outside their criteria based on sales loss calculations,” he recalls. Salvation came through his local network: a Parisian businessman connected him with Chartreuse distributors, transforming his

market reach overnight. “That saved the business for sure,” Abbott says.

Abbott’s accidental timing gave him advantages that today’s British entrepreneurs cannot replicate. Arriving in 2016 as a grieving widower, he integrated into his community during the final years of EU free movement. By the time Brexit’s new visa requirements, financial thresholds, and business registration barriers took effect, Abbott was already established as a local rather than a newcomer, with support networks that sustained him through the COVID crisis.

“100% the locals are the reason why I’m still here,” Abbott reflects, nine years into his Alpine experiment. His accidental pre-Brexit timing, combined with tragic circumstances that forced deep community integration, created advantages that today’s British entrepreneurs cannot easily replicate.

Beyond the success story

There are more Brits abroad than you might think. In fact, Britons living outside the UK represent one of the world’s largest diasporas, with a population equivalent to one in ten UK residents having left Britain. France remains a persistent draw for those seeking greener pastures.

Professor Michaela Benson has spent over twenty years studying British migration to France, long enough to witness patterns that individual success

stories like Abbott’s can obscure. “The primary motivation for many was not necessarily setting up a business but actually the quality of life they could imagine themselves having there,” Benson says.

This insight reframes how we think about entrepreneurial migration entirely. The distillery or brewery isn’t the goal, it’s the means to sustain a lifestyle that Britain couldn’t offer. Successful British entrepreneurs in France typically: “Align their choice of destination with the thing that they want to do, thinking about what business could sustain that,” Benson explains.

Benson has identified a ‘watershed moment’ pattern that drives successful migration. “There’s very often a sense of something having happened which resulted in them trying to change their lives,” she observes. Job loss, relationship changes, bereavement – these disruptions become opportunities for geographic and professional reinvention, – “Really turning something pretty negative into something that was exciting and new,” Benson says.

This pattern helps explain why some British entrepreneurs thrive while others struggle. Those who move following major life changes often arrive with the psychological openness needed for deep cultural integration, rather than trying to recreate British life in a French setting.

Benson’s research reveals a crucial structural advantage for drinks entrepreneurs specifically. “If you are making wine or making beer, if you have to be involved with other local entrepreneurs or suppliers, you already have greater opportunities to establish those networks that we think of when we think of the word integration,” she says.

This isn’t just about social connections but about economic necessity creating cultural bridges. Brewery and distillery operations require local supplier relationships, market participation and customer interaction. These business requirements force exactly the kind of community engagement that sustains long-term success.

“Where it becomes difficult is where those networks are absent because you’re not involved with those local suppliers or other entrepreneurs,” Benson notes. Without business reasons for local participation, integration becomes much harder to achieve.

Even successful businesses can face integration challenges when partners experience unequal access to local networks. Benson has observed



Le Gin du Mont Blanc – produced from a collaboration with former master distiller for Tanqueray Tom Nichol

couples where “one of them had come up with the idea of moving to France and persuaded the other one,” often resulting in dramatically different integration experiences.

When one partner manages markets, suppliers, and customer relationships while the other remains more isolated, relationship strain can follow. Benson’s research shows this dynamic particularly affects second relationships where couples use France as part of establishing a new life together.

The Brexit reality check

For current entrepreneurs, the regulatory landscape has transformed completely. “It’s much more difficult to set yourself up as an entrepreneur in France these days than it was before Brexit,” Benson explains. During the free movement era, oversight was minimal. “There were British people living in France before Brexit who didn’t meet the conditions of free movement, but nobody ever checked them.”

Today’s entrepreneurs face visa requirements, financial thresholds and business registration barriers that didn’t exist before 2021. Yet Benson’s research reveals an unexpected psychological consequence: Brexit created identity crises among British expatriates themselves rather than French hostility. “The sense of belonging that was deeply impacted was their sense of whether they were really British,” she explains.

Nevertheless, for those dreaming of a new life in France the statistics remain encouraging. Benson’s research

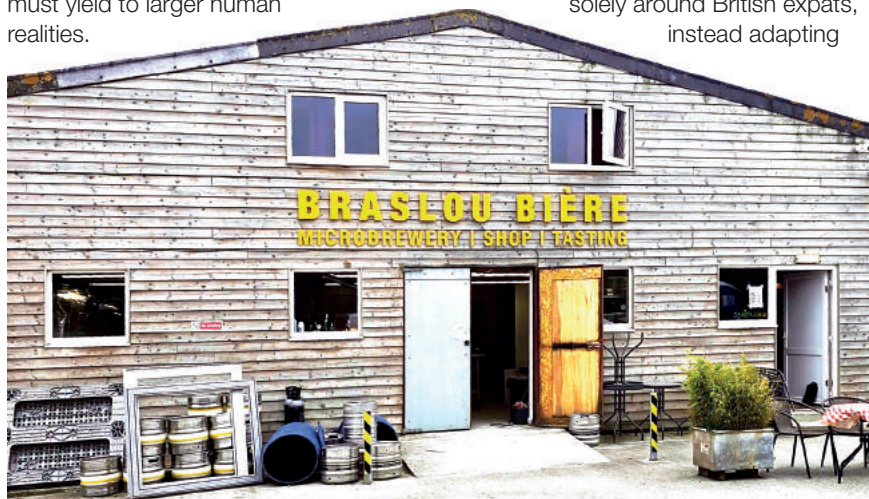


After releasing 300 bottles of Mont Blanc Whisky at the end of 2021, another 300 bottles were released at the end of summer 2023. All stock is now sold out (Photo: Distilleries Saint Gervais)

shows only one in eight British expatriates return to the UK. Most who make the leap stick with it, though success increasingly demands preparation that earlier generations didn’t require.

When return migration does happen, it typically stems from family commitments or a breakdown of relationships rather than business failure. For entrepreneurs whose French dreams create unsustainable personal costs, success itself can force impossible choices between professional achievement and family harmony.

Understanding these patterns matters because they reveal that entrepreneurial success and personal sustainability operate independently. Sometimes even thriving businesses must yield to larger human realities.



The Braslou taproom – previously in Braslou-le-Pert, France but now relocated to St Issey, North Cornwall

When the dream hits reality

Tommy Barnes still drives his 1982 Peugeot van around Cornwall, a tangible reminder of six years brewing in rural France. His story represents what Benson’s research reveals about the one in eight British expatriates who return to the UK. Barnes achieved everything Abbott did in terms of community integration, cultural adaptation and business viability yet still faced an impossible choice.

“I sort of fell in love with it pretty much instantly,” Barnes says of his first homebrew batch in Braslou-le-Pert. Moving on from a voluntary redundancy with minimal planning, he embodied the pre-Brexit ease many entrepreneurs experienced. “We moved to France almost on a whim,” he admits. What followed was perfect integration with weekly markets improving his French, local relationships deepening, and business networks forming naturally.

Barnes achieved exactly what successful integration requires. His Friday market presence created vital business networks. “I met so many people there. My French improved enormously,” he recalls.

For Barnes, the regulatory setup proved unusually straightforward. Regional bureaucracy was accommodating with Barnes noting “We got set up pretty easy and that was it,” particularly in wine-growing areas with established small-producer frameworks. Barnes even leveraged his cultural outsider status. “You get away with loads being a bumbling English, a funny little Englishman,” he notes, describing how mistakes forgiven as cultural quirks would anger customers if made by French producers.

He avoided building his business solely around British expats, instead adapting

his brewing to suit the locals' tastes. For instance, his Belgian-style Berger Blonde, one of Barnes's best sellers, is named in honour of his neighbour, Damien Berger. It is Berger who explained to Barnes that these are the types of beers that French people enjoy.

Yet this success masked growing problems. While Barnes built external relationships through markets and supplier connections, his wife Rose experienced isolation at home. "I think I was out doing all this stuff, at markets and things, whereas Rose was at home a lot and I think she felt quite isolated," Barnes explains.

The weight of being your own boss

For a time, everything seemed to be working. Barnes was building his customer base, perfecting his recipes and becoming part of the community fabric. But as demand grew and the brewery scaled up, cracks began to appear in what had looked like a success story.

The operational pressures that nearly broke Barnes were specific and relentless. Heat exchanger breakdowns, contaminated batches and equipment failures created cascading crises. "I didn't know why my beers weren't coming out well," Barnes recalls. Under-capitalised and lacking technical expertise, he faced each crisis without the support networks that established brewers possess.

Barnes despaired as batch after batch failed. "You just felt completely like, as if you were sort of floating out to sea, without a paddle," he says. The rural isolation that made France appealing became a liability when sourcing replacement parts required distant travel. Each equipment failure meant lost production, missed deliveries and immediate cash flow pressure – all of which was



Breslou Bière's Berger Blonde continues to be brewed...a little bit of France in Cornwall (Photo: Braslou Bière)

compounded by managing these crises in a second language while supporting two young children.

The entrepreneurial freedom Barnes cherished carried impossible responsibility. "Being your own boss, the flip side of that is it's all on you, and you can't turn to anyone, you've got to sort it out," he reflects. Technical problems that established brewers solve with phone calls became existential threats to under-prepared operations.

When Rose announced she wanted to return to Cornwall, Barnes faced an impossible decision. "It was very hard, very hard. I'm still getting over it," he says. The brewery was working, community integration was complete but family sustainability had become incompatible with business success.

Barnes initially thought he was done with owning a brewery. "I'd given up," he says. "I thought, well, for myself, I don't want to have my own brewery again because of the stress." When he returned to the UK with his family, he took a job at St Austell brewery, partly because the employment opportunity helped justify the return to Cornwall.

But the move proved a poor fit. "I lasted six months there," Barnes recalls. The shift work in particular was grueling. "Every third week you were doing night shifts and I found that really tricky." Worse was the loss of autonomy. "I was sort of 12th brewer out of 12, so the bottom of the rung. So, you were really just a processor," he says. The contrast with entrepreneurial independence was stark. "It's really hard to go back to working with someone when you've been your own boss."



St Issey IPA – a current favourite at 5.2% ABV (Photo: Braslou Bière)

When Barnes decided to leave St Austell, he thought he might open a bottle shop and sell other people's beer. But a conversation with Simon Pippola, a prominent figure in the home-brew scene, changed his mind – not least because, as Pippola pointed out, the margins are more favourable as a brewer. On top of which, Barnes found himself at a loss when he considered what else he might do. "Yeah, I don't want to go back to an office or anything like that," he says.

Barnes says that UK operations present different challenges to those he faced in France. "It's harder. Margins are smaller. Everything's being squeezed," he says. The language barriers may have been removed, but the economics of running a small brewery remain challenging. The taxes are higher, as is rent on units in which to brew, meaning profits get squeezed.

Barnes's brewing today reflects his French years in ways both obvious and subtle. He still uses French hops like Triskel in most of his beers, maintains continental yeast suppliers, and continues brewing the Berger Blonde that Damien insisted he perfect. "People often say, oh, your beers taste a bit of French," Barnes observes with amusement.

The old Peugeot van makes its rounds through Cornwall now, delivering beer that carries the DNA of those Loire Valley markets. Barnes admits he's seemingly learned nothing about business resilience – "It's been the same here, basically," he says – yet his approach has clearly evolved. The dream didn't die when it crossed the Channel; it just learned to drive on different roads.



Tommy's story can be followed in the first two of his (potential) trilogy available from all good bookstores and online (Images: Amazon.co.uk)