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The Cooks of Chianti

by [Bill Zacharkiw](#)

Some people dream of owning a restaurant, others perhaps a bed and breakfast, or maybe a quaint country inn. But I know many wine lovers who dare to dream of owning a winery. The Cook family from St. Bruno has turned that dream into reality.

In 2010, Jim and Rita Cook, along with daughter Paula, bought a seven-hectare property in the heart of Chianti Classico, one of the wine world's most famous appellations in Italy's most renowned winemaking region: Tuscany. I spent 24 hours with Jim and Paula at their winery, Le Miccine, during my last visit to the region.

So how does a family from the South Shore end up with a winery in Tuscany? Jim, who was born and raised in Scotland, immigrated to Quebec in 1982 with a Ph.D. in metallurgy. He was employed by international mining company Rio Tinto. He worked his way up the corporate ladder until he was named CEO of Rio Tinto Iron and Titanium. He retired at the age of 55 in 2007.

His appreciation for wine started when he was sent to South Africa in 1992, when Paula was 10. "We would let Paula smell the wines and would ask her to tell us what that reminded her of," Jim told me with a hint of pride in his voice.

"She was pretty good even then."

His vision of retirement already included the possibility of owning a winery, even before Paula showed any interest in wine. "When Paula was doing her degree in Agriculture and Environmental Science, I used to browse websites with vineyards for sale in France. They were small, not too expensive, mostly in the Loire valley. For 500,000 euros (\$700,000), I could get a house, tractor and a few vines. Sometimes the owners of these small vineyards were even willing to stay on to show you how to do things. But when Paula started the masters in winemaking, we decided to look at doing something more serious."

Paula's route to becoming grape grower and winemaker, just a few of the roles she fulfills in the business, came gradually. "I did my undergraduate degree in Agriculture at MacDonald College. I love plant physiology, biology and microbiology and knew I wanted to work in the field, but was looking to specialize," she explained. She found a European Commission-funded program, based in France, whose purpose was to encourage non-European students to study in Europe. She was accepted and set off in 2006 to do a two-year master's in Viticulture and Oenology. "It was perfect for me as it combined everything I was passionate about – plant science, microbiology, travelling, cultures and languages." The tipping point came when Paula went to Bordeaux and

worked at the family winery of renowned winemaker and consultant Patrick Léon. “It was hands-on winemaking and I remember the exact moment when I looked up at him and told him that I knew that this was what I wanted to do for a career. He was a mentor to me, and despite feeling that I had so much to learn, he said stop thinking so much about whether you are ready and just jump in, believe in yourself.”

