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Winters author Georgeanne Brennan is selling the dream

Georgeanne Brennan's new lifestyle website puts the heart in artisanal

By [Nancy Brands Ward](#)

There are probably few who among us who haven't, at least once, fantasized about chucking it all, moving to the south of France, and enjoying a slow, close-to-the-earth life. That's just what Georgeanne Brennan—award-winning memoirist and author of 30-plus gardening and cook books—did in 1970.

The stability of country life countered the destruction of daily life Brennan had felt as a student in Southern California in the midst of the Vietnam War. On a farm she still owns in Provence, she planted and harvested fruits and vegetables, learned from locals the nearly lost art of making creamy smooth cheese from the milk of goats she raised, and scavenged the nearby fields for mushrooms, truffles and herbs. Daily life revolved around food and the earth's seasons and each week ended with cooking, eating and talking with friends and family.

Living that way, Brennan, who now lives in Yolo County, explained to SN&R in 2010, “You were able to act as opposed to being acted upon.” (See “Seasonal, Fresh, Local” by Nancy Brands Ward, SN&R News, June 24, 2010).

Arguably, that Provençal lifestyle set the course for Brennan's life and her long career at the forefront of the seasonal and slow-food movements. And she's now brought it full circle with the September launch of *La Vie Rustic*, a site that creates a framework (and sells the



Move over Gwyneth and Blake, Georgeanne Brennan's new lifestyle site draws on the author's time living in France.

PHOTO BY MARK BENNINGTON

products) to support practicing a sustainable life in the French style.

Learn more at

www.georgeannebrennan.com or

www.lavierustic.com.

Brennan's website is organized according to elements that comprise the heart of French living: The kitchen (La Cuisine), the kitchen garden (La Potager), the orchard (Le Verger), the tools for the garden and fields (Les Outils), et al.

Every product, every description on La Vie Rustic resonates with the depth of the 71-year-old Brennan's passion and a lifetime of experience researching, writing and teaching.

Her subject? "The pleasure and reward of growing and producing food for myself, and at the same time caring for a small part of the earth and its creatures in a sustainable, healthy and generous way," Brennan says.

She continues to live this way today on her small farm in Winters, and on frequent trips to her home in Provence.

"Everything I do works—it's genuine," she told SN&R during a recent interview.

For some, Brennan's philosophy has made a significant impact.

When Steve Sando, who now owns Napa's Rancho Gordo Specialty Foods, was a young man living in a cinder-block apartment in San Francisco, he had no interest in gardening. Then he read Brennan's 1992 book, *Potager Fresh Garden Cooking in the French Style*, and says it changed his life. Brennan, he says, made him see that "gardening wasn't just about food production, it was all about having a better kitchen."

At a recent dinner in Napa, Sando honored Brennan's role in the food revolution.

"Georgianne knows her stuff backwards and forwards," Sando says. "She's the real thing."

That knowledge runs deep. For example, her expertise on seeds—she once developed the seed catalogs for Smith & Hawken, a Williams & Sonoma product line, and her own Le Marché Seeds—shows in her ability to track down the authentic 100-plus-years-old seeds for French chicory and lettuce she offers for the kitchen vegetable garden.



Many of the items available on La Vie Rustic are made by a small team working on Brennan's Winters farm.
PHOTO BY NICOLE STURZENBERGER

Her passion for history is also evident when Brennan, who was educated as a historian at UC San Diego, talks about the fig trees she's selling. She and her husband, Jim Schrupp, have cultivated 150 trees from cuttings of the Sultan de Marabout Fig Tree—originally given to the United States by the Agricultural Commissioner of Algeria during the early 20th Century—that's been flourishing from a cutting for years in her own orchard.

To Brennan, the world's best salt is harvested from the ancient sea marshes in France's Brittany. She combines it with figs from her orchard and local California apricots in products that deliver different accents for anything from salad dressings and toppings for ice cream to rubs for pork and duck. These are available on La Vie Rustic,

together with dozens of tips for how to enjoy them.

Or, there are the recipes for Pâté Maison and duck-liver pâté, both of which result from the same creativity and knowledge that fueled cookbooks for which Brennan earned prestigious awards. She won the James Beard Award for 1997's *The Food and Flavors of Haute Provence* and a Julia Child/International Association of Culinary Professionals award for *Aperitif*, published that same year.

Elsewhere on the site, Brennan sells bay leaves harvested from her personal tree; likewise, the Herbs de Provence are a mixture of only the things that could be gathered in Provence. No basil, no mint.

“And, boy, when you open that jar, it just takes me back to Provence,” says Brennan. “That’s what I want.”

This deep connection with people and the earth Brennan found in the French countryside was the theme of her 2012 memoir, *A Pig in Provence*. She says she believes that people today yearn for a similarly authentic way to live.

“For a couple of generations that have grown up without that experience of growing lettuce from a seed, it’s like a miracle to grow it yourself,” she says, noting also the pleasure of surrounding yourself with well-crafted, well-thought out things.

La Vie Rustic pulls together elements of an authentic French country life and some products—such as the handmade historic tools, homemade pancetta, and packets of red poppy and white Bishop’s Lace seeds—are unique to the site.

Many of the company’s products are made by a small team on Brennan’s farm, together with the help of area artists and craftspeople.

For example, packages designed by a Marin artist are printed using copper plates on an old Heidelberg letterpress by Winters Printing. A local craftsman constructs the wooden box Brennan sells with instructions for making French-style prosciutto, and Elliot Landes, a Winters artist who specializes in wooden pens, fashions the black-walnut handles of the sickles to use in the garden. Yolo Forge, which opened in 1857 and is the oldest existing forge in California, makes the blades. The blades are also tempered by local craftsmen.

Brennan’s passion is evident as she talks about the site’s future, throwing out ideas for such things as working with a local potter to recreate her ailing French baking dishes, incorporating French linens in the product line, and creating the elements of a “child’s first garden,” with seeds big enough for a child to handle (fava beans, artichokes). Seed collections for spring, summer and fall are in the near future. Six different olive, quince and Maribel plum trees are a little farther down the line. A book—or a series of books—covering the entire concept may result from this endeavor that began more than 15 years ago and sums up Brennan’s life work.

So far, Brennan says, she’s found a market for her goods, with orders coming in daily.

“There’s a real thrill in getting to do these things that I personally love and care about,” Brennan says. “It’s exciting that somebody would love something that I love. There’s a magic in it. When you plant those seeds, you are doing the same thing that some farmer did 125 years ago. You bring all that history, and there it is in my garden and on my table ... and it’s France.”

But that doesn’t mean that everyone can or wants to lead this lifestyle fully. So, Brennan has designed products that anyone—backyard and urban gardeners, animal husbandmen and women, home cooks and anyone, anywhere—can pick and choose from as they wish to bring elements of this life she loves into their own.

Life in Provence, Brennan explains, involves a lot more “being” than “doing” —being with nature, being with animals, being with friends and family. When she gazes out the window at the persimmon tree in her kitchen orchard or walks out to her 4,000-square-foot vegetable garden each morning in Winters, Brennan says: “I’m just looking; I’m not doing anything.

“It’s nice to have things you really enjoy that you can look at,” she says. “Who wouldn’t want to look out a window and see red poppies?”