

# *Vintage Travel*

The Champagne region of France is waiting to be acknowledged as a 'cultural landscape' by UNESCO. In the meantime, the homeland of bubbles offers wonderful experiences for those in the know

**Words:** Stephan Burianek



## Champagne



**Les grande dame** (above) Château Champagne Pommery is just one of the region's legendary estates  
**Vine country** (previous page) The village of Reims is surrounded by hectares of vineyards and is a must-stop on your tour

So here I am, at the metaphorical end of the rainbow: Champagne, France. It's a veritable dream come true for any lover of France's famed export, but my undying affection for the beatific sparkling wine from this bucolic region of north-east France is not the only reason for my enthusiasm. I am also fascinated by the countless stories of monks and widows, of kings and tsars who are connected with the birthplace of sparkling wines, just an hour and a half's drive from Paris.

My hotel in the sleepy village of Vrigny has only five individually designed rooms and one concierge who is ready to take care of every need at any time. Le Clos des Terres Soudées is more like a boutique hotel than a bed and breakfast, which is what it modestly calls itself. The hotel is owned by Eric and Isabelle Coulon. Eric is an eighth-generation champagne-maker whose family has lived in the region since the 1800s.

In its public spaces, the hotel's interior design follows the current trend for dark walls, neo-Baroque fixtures and dimmed lights. I like the friendly and unique design of my guestroom, even though function follows form,

rather than the other way round. It is themed on a champagne cellar, with perforated beech panels on the walls that remind me of the racks that are still used by some champagne houses for *remuage*, a process in which the yeast sediment of full champagne bottles is moved to their crown corks by turning them periodically by hand (before 'disgorging' them for consumption). This part of the production process, by the way, was invented by one of Champagne's legendary widows, Barbe-Nicole Clicquot-Ponsardin; a lady famous today for her yellow-labeled bottles.

Those eager to learn more about the art of champagne-making should knock at the doors of Roger Coulon, the Coulons' modest champagne house across the street, which provides guests with insights into the production facilities upon request. As a so-called *Récoltant-Manipulant*, the Coulon family only uses grapes from their own vineyards, which means they do not purchase from other growers. This distinguishes them from the *Grandes Marques*; the big names that are found en masse around the world. Coulon's vineyards are all located nearby, in the Western part of the Montagne de Reims, where mainly pinot noir grapes are planted.

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Photo: OT Reims - Carmen Moya

**Down to a vine art** (opposite page) A wine-grower tends to his carefully maintained vines, the fruits of which are bottled and stores in cave cellars such as this one at the Tattinger estate (above)

From Vreigny it is only a short drive to Reims, which is widely known as the town where the kings of France were once crowned. The Notre-Dame cathedral, a Gothic masterpiece, and the adjacent Palais du Tau, where for many centuries French kings spent the night before coronation, are must-sees. The present-day splendour of these buildings, however, cannot hide the fact that they were heavily battered during the First World War, like the rest of the city. Until today, the bullet holes on the façade of the town hall (Hôtel de Ville) remind us of the heavy fighting that shattered the whole Champagne region 100 years ago.

Although Reims has developed itself into a lively spot, with examples of Art Deco architecture everywhere, its real assets are to be found underground. More than 100 kilometres of wine cellars riddle the city's underbelly. The most interesting ones can be entered just outside the city centre, on the Saint-Nicaise hill, where several traditional champagne houses invite visitors to their *crayères* — champagne cellars.

What makes these caves so special is the fact that they consist of gigantic, cone-shaped chalk pits that were created in ancient times by the Gallo-Romans who used

the chalk to build their city. When champagne became extremely popular in the 19th century, some producers integrated these subterranean domes into new tunnel systems that provided enough space for the maturation process of their bottles.

One of these producers was Madame Pommery, another legendary widow. While visiting Pommery's historic cellar, I regularly stop, stunned, and turn my head up to study the giant bas-reliefs, many of which depict Bacchanalian themes. The cave is also used as a space for contemporary art that is curated by Nathalie Vranken, the wife of today's owner of the champagne house.

In contrast, the *crayères* of another important producer, Taittinger, might appear less bombastic, but provide a more intimate feel. Cross vaults testify that the cellar once used to be part of an abbey that was destroyed a long time ago. Both the *crayères* of Pommery and Taittinger show only a very small but impressive part of the companies' production. In order to fully enjoy the magical ambience of these places, it is advisable to book private tours, so you avoid being flooded through in big groups. It also saves you from having to drink ordinary, non-vintage champagnes at the end.

“CONSIDERING THE UNIFORM CUSTOMS OF CHAMPAGNE-GROWING, I AM AMAZED BY THE VAST AMOUNT OF DIFFERENT FLAVOURS THAT I ENCOUNTER DURING MY TASTINGS”



Photo: Getty Images

The *crayères* of Reims form an important chapter in Champagne's application for inclusion as a protected UNESCO cultural landscape. Another crucial piece in this proposition is the Avenue de Champagne in Épernay, which connects a further congeries of important producers with large cellar systems.

**THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

Épernay is located on the 'other' side of the Montagne de Reims, in the south, and is considered the heart of Champagne, while Reims is considered the capital, with greater importance for international trade. Strolling the Avenue de Champagne, with its Belle Époque and Art Deco buildings, is certainly a must-do while in the region.

To get a better understanding of where the bubbles come from, I explore the countryside and visit several promising small producers that are kindly recommended by a Champenoise who works at a popular wine store in Vienna. My list turns out to be a priceless companion, since most of the well-known Grande Marques in the countryside keep a low profile and don't receive tourists. Don't try to ring the bell at Deutz or even Salon. Laurent-Perrier, at least, should be considered a laudable exception. They might not show you inside their historic estate in Tours-sur-Marne, but they sell their products with a notable price reduction there, including their noble prestige cuvée, Grand Siècle.

So, what is on my list? I first head to Ay, a picturesque village next to Épernay that is the historical core of Champagne (a French king even had his own wine press there). Among many notable producers, I find the champagnes by René Geoffroy outstanding (and fairly priced). Try also Goutorbe (located in the same street). When you go south from Ay, you will drive along the Côte des Blancs ridge, where chardonnay is king. In Vertus, you should not miss Veuve Fourny & Fils.

Every vineyard I see along the way has rows of fussily kept grapevines that look like they are pruned by nail scissors. They are evidence of the strict rules that champagne growers have to observe. Considering the uniform customs of champagne growing, I am amazed by the vast amount of different flavours that I encounter in the champagnes during my tastings.

One of my personal favourites among the family-run champagne businesses is off the beaten track. Apasie is located in the Vallée de l'Ardre, not far from Vreigny, and the cheerful owner Paul-Vincent Ariston seems pleased to welcome inquisitive enthusiasts like me.

It is there where I am confronted for the first time with the region's forgotten varieties of champagne. Champagne lovers know that three different varieties of grape are permitted in its production (pinot noir, chardonnay, and meunier). But, in fact, there are more. Ariston produces a decent cuvée from pinot blanc grapes and two other varieties I've never heard of before. He calls it Cépages d'Antan Brut, and I am stunned by its powerful combination of buttery smell, mineral acidity, ripe fruits and hints of smoky flavour.

It might be hard to believe, but all of this is exceeded on my last night, when I arrive at a dinner reservation at Les Avisés in Avize (Côte des Blancs), a dignified boutique hotel and restaurant that is part of the Jacques Selosse estate.

## Champagne

The evening's menu by chef Stéphane Rossillon is sheer poetry. Scallops covered with razor-thin bacon are presented in a chestnut purée, and both the sole and the veal tongue that follow almost melt in my mouth.

As for the champagne? The winemaker, Anselme Selosse, is probably the most ingenious sparkling wine producer on this planet. I had the privilege to meet him before dinner. "Champagne is not about bubbles, it is the freshness from the chalk," he says. Later, I am poured a glass of Les Carelles, one of his unique terroir champagnes. The golden liquid produces extensive wine legs in the glass — not a flute, by the way, but a white wine glass — and multiple aromas in my nose. There are herbs; there is sun; it smells mature and young at the same time and smoothly snuggles against my palate. Paired with the chef's creations it's a real revelation; heavenly and so much better than any dream could be. ■

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**Laying low** (top to bottom) Tattinger's champagne caves in Reims; an airy bedroom at Hôtel Les Avisés



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