

STORY AND PHOTOS BY E.C. GLADSTONE

Champagne

Going beyond the bubbles.





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HICH WOULD YOU choose as your dream vacation: luxury escape, historical tour or nature retreat? It's such a common conundrum that you find it on personality tests.

But what if you could combine all three? Even as a seasoned traveler, I wouldn't have thought it possible — not in equal proportion, surely — until I spent time in a storied destination worthy of rediscovery: France's Champagne-Ardenne.



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THE HOME OF THE world’s best bubbly also happens to be a place of pivotal European history (from the ancient Romans to World War II) and — who knew? — even surrounds a forest offering camping, bike trails and geological wonders. All of this is accessible within a two-hour drive radius.

Champagne has, in effect, two capitals, and which city you chose as your embarkation point (less than an hour from Paris via the high-speed TGV rail) can have some influence on the balance of your experience. Reims and Epernay are both quintessential regional French towns with proud local traditions. Reims is larger and has more history and diversity; Epernay, a bit quieter and simple, is considered the true heart of Champagne country — not to mention home of the mother ship Moët & Chandon plant and majestic Maison Perrier-Jouët. Depending on your outlook, you might prefer staying at Reims’ five-star Château Les Crayères, nestled within its own park; the simpler but modern Le Clos Margot, a bed-and-breakfast connected to Champagne Doyard in tiny Vertus; or, if you’re inclined to roughing it à la française, one of nine camping and caravan sites in the area.

My own week in the area was based in Äy, a satellite of Epernay, at the quaint but

comfortable Hotel Castel Jeanson (a restored 19th-century town house with indoor swimming pool and private baths) run by the Champagne Goutourbe family and literally down the block from Maison Deutz and several other wineries.

La Vie Delicieuse

Regardless of your interests, it’s unlikely you’ll be drawn to Champagne without at least a passing fancy for the primary product. In different directions, you can explore the Valley of the Ardre, Valley of the Marne or the Côte des Blancs. Renting a car and driving yourself is relatively easy — most of the roads are small and quiet — so long as you keep eyes peeled for directional signs and show patience and courtesy on the one-lane streets. Cycling is also a popular option, particularly in the lowlands around Epernay.

In the Ardre, find Merfy (the lone winery here, Chartogne-Taillet, makes Michael Mina’s house cuvee; get an appointment if you can); Hermonville, with an authentic oak barrel cooper; and Chalons-sur-Vesle, where churches, castles and centuries-old houses abound.

On the slopes circling the central Montagne de Reims are Grand Cru towns

such as Mailly-Champagne, Verzenay and Bouzy (site of a snail farm that offers cooking classes). At many points, flowers can seem almost as plentiful as vines, part of a regional tradition that used many species as early forms of pest control. Should you tire of bubbles (if such a thing is possible), in Louvois stands the Distillerie Guillon, makers of single-malt whiskey, something you certainly don’t see often in France.

South of Epernay in Côte des Blancs, where Chardonnay grapes dominate, towns worth a stop include Chouilly (the Nicolas Feuillatte winery tour provides an excellent explanation of modern Champagne-making), Oger, Vertus (home of the Paul Goerg winery) and Nesle-le-Reposte, with a chèvrière. In Pierry, I enjoyed a visit to the gorgeous 18th-century Château de la Marquetterie, restored and owned now by Taittinger, which brings up an important point: If you happen to have a good relationship with a prominent sommelier or wine retailer, by all means ask about any contacts he or she might have here. A personal referral could result in opportunities not generally available to the public.

But even without connections, if you time your visit for harvest from late August to early October, several growers will happily allow

you to help with the picking (it's all still done by hand throughout Champagne). As picking times are not decided until very close to the date, nothing is guaranteed. And weather here can be mercurial; while I enjoyed crisp, clear skies throughout my week, everyone noted what a rare stretch it was.

You'll also find that Champagne is not the only comestible tradition here. Did you know gingerbread dates to 15th-century Reims? That the ancestor of cookies was created here in the 1690s? That there are several cheese styles native to the region? Not to mention the pink Biscuits Fossier and astounding range of Clovis mustards and vinegars.

Certainly the people of Champagne know how to complement their wines. There are two two-star Michelin restaurants in the area, including Le Parc Les Crayères (at the château of the same name), and one-star Hostellerie La Briquetricie, near Epernay. But even the less ambitious eateries clearly take pride in their establishments. Epernay's Le Theatre restaurant, with its high-ceilinged plush red dining room, feels like a classic salon of a bygone era, though I enjoyed an impressively up-to-date meal that wouldn't feel out of place in the best seasonal American destination. Le Table Kobus looks even more traditional inside (think Moulin Rouge) but the menu is thoroughly modern in inspiration, particularly in the category of cheese, from a chèvre mousse amuse-bouche to a fantastically light cheesecake.

In Reims, Côte Cuisine, with casual seating outdoors or an inside high-ceilinged dining room, serves a variety of updated classic dishes, with a particularly nice menu of six different tartares. Even at the pop-up street market on the pedestrian Place Drouet d'Erlon (site of lots of casual cafes and bars) I found an intoxicating array of spices, salts, cured meats and je ne c'est quoi.

The winemakers and growers of Champagne are a fascinating lot, all proud either of their private efforts or of their associations with the bigger houses, but none having the sort of arrogance often associated with the French temperament. While I could pick favorites from the literally hundreds of private labels here, the reality is that trying any of them is sure to be a worthwhile experience, considering the scarcity of most in the US. Still, it seems almost mandatory to visit at least one of the major maisons in the heights of Reims: Pommery, Taittinger, Veuve Clicquot, Ruinart, G.H. Mumm and Lanson.

March of Time

In fact, you'll want to carve out at least a full day just for Reims, once the capital of ancient Roman Gaul (with ruins in the city center) and the site where Clovis, first king of a united France, was baptized. The actual spot is where Reims' Notre-Dame was built, beginning in 1211, and became the place of coronation for

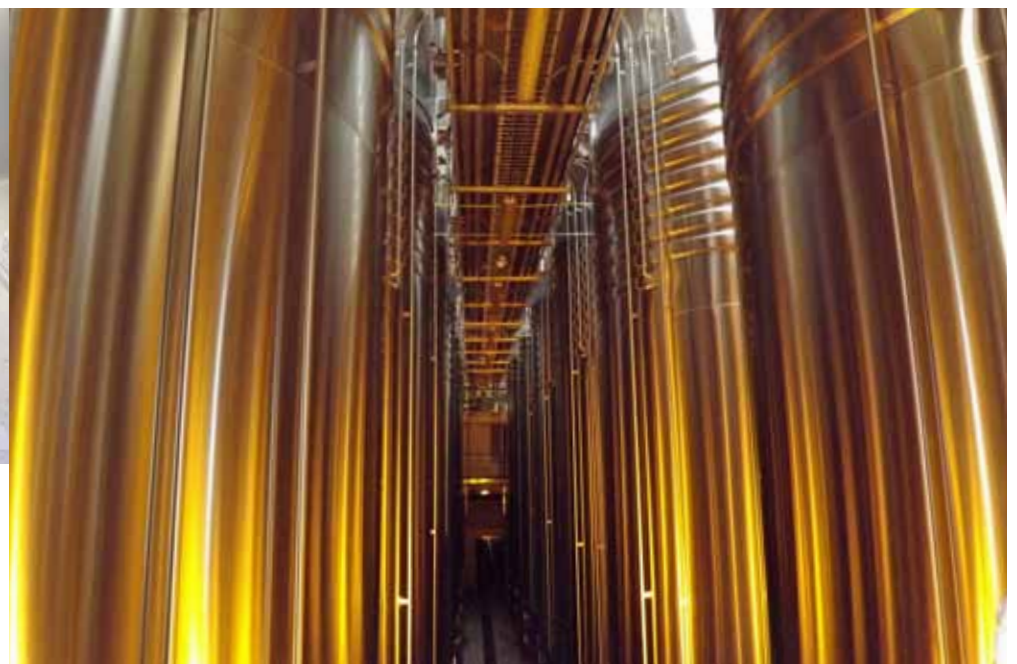


nearly all French kings. Even for those who feel they've seen enough historic cathedrals in their life, Notre-Dame de Reims' various stages of construction, destruction and restoration tell a history more powerfully than words can alone.

A stroll around the city center reveals a further range of architecture, from pre-Revolution half-timbered houses to the art deco Bibliothèque Carnegie. Across from the Pommery gates is the Villa Demoiselle, a recently restored art nouveau mansion and gardens. And the Capitulation museum preserves the actual spot where the German Luftwaffe surrendered to General Eisenhower



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in 1945. On the city's edge, Fort de la Pompelle maintains an extensive collection of artifacts from the Great War, and within the Montagne de Reims park on Mont-Sinaï are the remains of a World War I French army observation post.

Farther afield, Valley of the Marne northwest of Epernay is most known today as the domain of pinot meunier grapes; however, it also includes the historically re-created village of Oeuilly, as well as the locale of Hautvillers, where Dom Perignon first tamed (if you will) the bubbles of Champagne, and a memorial to World War I's two battles of the Marne, in Dormans (1,500 unknown soldiers are interred here).

Civilized Nature

Speaking of fields, the Montagne de Reims parkland practically calls out for you to explore its Faux de Verzy forest, dense with twisted beech trees. Several public stables can be found (as well as a broad spectrum of sports fields) and the southerly Lac du Der has an auto-free cyclist course around its perimeter.

Perhaps the most rewarding time I spent all week (when I wasn't drinking the bubbles, that is) was my afternoon with Nicolas and Marie-Noelle Rainon, who run the Oenovasion tour company. In a comfortable four-wheel-drive vehicle, we crisscrossed the Montagne de Reims between Reims and Epernay, often on rutted dirt roads, traveling through mostly ungated vineyards, towns and forest as the pair described history, geology, flora and fauna and even stopped to teach my co-travelers and I how to tell chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier vines apart by their leaves. As Nicolas explained (and I would hear again throughout my visit), Champagne growers and winemakers function under a unique collective system that controls all aspects of the process while enforcing certain autonomies. It gives the area, both in function and spirit, a kind of odd balance between ambered innocence and efficiency.

We finished back at their headquarters with some local cheeses and a sampling of their own Champagnes Henriët-Bazin (of course they bottle their own; everyone here seems to), but they also offer bespoke tours where you can picnic in the vineyards and

travel by mountain bike or even a vintage '70s European muscle car.

Should your thirst for Champagne country not yet be sated, you may want to travel a couple more hours south, through Troyes to Côte Des Bar, the southernmost region of Champagne-growing, where there are other intriguing maisons to visit, from the restored manor of Veuve Devaux, next to the trickling remnants of the river Seine (Bar-Sur-Seine), to Charles de Gaulle's favorite, Drappier (Urville), built over the 12th-century cellars of Clairvaux Abbey. Sample this area's other wine specialty, Rosé des Riceys, at one of the smaller makers here such as the excellent Jacques Defrance.

Even after five days, I felt like I had barely scratched the surface of worthy diversions here (fishing, hunting, sport aviation and more) and the seemingly endless number of wineries to visit. But my half-ticked to-do list just made me want to plan a return — and soon. **M**



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