

## REPORTING: CHAMPAGNE/ARDENNES, FRANCE

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Champagne Tasting

### FRANCE'S CHAMPAGNE/ARDENNES REGION – NEVER LOOKED OR TASTED SO GOOD

By Adrian Maher  
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CHAMPAGNE/ARDENNES, FRANCE -- On previous trips to Paris, I've always yearned to venture outside its noise, crowds and high prices in search of the real France. In my mind, a postcard region of walled medieval villages, cobblestone streets and a lush landscape studded with Gothic cathedrals; A place of fragrant cheeses, savory local produce and of course, superb wine.

When some friends recently suggested a trip to France's rural Champagne/Ardennes region, I leapt.

Only 90 minutes northeast of Paris, the area boasts miles of rolling vineyards, tranquil rivers, and hilltops studded with charming chateaus. The lunches are long, the service is superb and the flashes of Gallic charm very much apparent. It is also home to the largest collection of champagne houses in the world - more than 100 in a 50-square-mile area - including such famous brands as Moet Chandon, Tattinger and Pommery.

Centuries before the Romans conquered Gaul, inhabitants have been drawn to the area's rich chalky soil with its limestone slopes - model conditions for growing the pluperfect grape. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a Benedictine monk, Dom Perignon, made a startling discovery that changed the wine-making region forever. He accidentally stumbled on a double fermentation technique that instilled his drink with flavor and fizz. Within months, the monks of the Benedictine abbey in the small village of Hautvillers, were renowned for their bubbly. The abbey is privately owned, but the Seventh Century Church still stands, as does Dom Perignon's tombstone in an adjacent cemetery.

For a sojourn throughout the region, I decided it was best to follow the Routes Touristiques de Champagne, which winds through several small cities, clusters of villages and vineyards. The ideal launching point is the city of Reims, pronounced "Ranz," that houses the ancient Cathedral of Notre-Dame. The church sits on the site where Clovis, King of the Franks, was baptized by St. Remi in 496 A.D. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century structure is a multi-spired edifice of more than 2300 statues that can accommodate 10,000 worshipers. From 1223 until 1823, it was the place where every French king, 25 of them, were crowned. Stained glass windows by artist Marc Chagall decorate the church's recesses.

Despite being badly damaged by German bombardment in World War I, the city still testifies to the glories of French history. It contains the 11<sup>th</sup> century Basilica of St. Remi with its splendid chandelier and the Beaux-Arts museum that is filled with

medieval portraits and landscapes. Only several blocks away, is the Porte de Mars, a Roman triumphal arch from the Third Century.

In most French towns, lunch is a sacred rite. Chef Herve Liegent prides himself on only serving local delicacies at his fabled restaurant, Le Vigneron, in Reims. The five-course meals often come with five different brands of champagne. The walls are covered with champagne posters from the 1800s and behind the adjoining glass is a veritable museum of ancient tools for culling the region's mighty grape.

After a lobster bisque titillated the palate, a pungent soup made of Langre cheese with a poached egg was served. A main course of diced-baby pigeon and some local "chou" or cabbage with a red-wine mushroom sauce then sent me to Valhalla. A board covered with local cheeses, particularly Chaource - ripe, tangy, and runny, was offered with some country sourdough. Dessert was a molten chocolate cake that seemed to burst open with every fork-full. Strong coffee and small biscuits from the local bakery left me completely satiated. The price: \$60.

The French "art of the table," a long midday break filled with potent conversation, good friends and exquisite local food lasted more than three hours. Some local businessman at an adjacent setting took even more time. The aphorism - "The Americans eat to live, the French live to eat," had never seemed so true.

After two days, I journeyed 40 miles south to Epernay, France's champagne capital - a town of classical chateaus and renaissance architecture. The small city is surrounded by sloping vineyards and abuts the river Marne. Within the town, the major champagne houses - Mercier, Pol Roger, Perrier-Jouet and De Venoge among others - line both sides of the Avenue de Champagne. Hundreds of thousands of visitors come each year to wander the streets sampling the world's finest bubbly. Underground are more than 60 miles of underground cellars holding hundreds of millions of bottles of champagne.

I received a public tour of the Moet Chandon caves, a mesmerizing series of dark, dank tunnels under the company's chateau headquarters, that housed endless rows of bottles filled with fermenting wine. One of Moet's marketing directors, Arnaud de Mareuil, guided me through the warren of passageways and proudly outlined the delicate process of making champagne. The grapes are pressed and left to ferment in large metal vats for several weeks. Superior wines are officially ranked as "grand cru," and then expertly blended. Cane sugar and yeast are added and bottles are temporarily corked and stacked on their side at 45-degree angles in the caves. A second slow fermentation starts as the sugar is turned into alcohol and carbonic gas, giving the champagne its fizz. The wine is then stacked for 12-36 months at 50 degrees Fahrenheit and then taken through a process called "riddling," where each bottle is routinely gently shaken to loosen deposits. The bottles are eventually stacked vertically, the collected deposits removed and a cork inserted and wired for selling. (For public-tour information contact: [www.champagne.com](http://www.champagne.com))

I eagerly followed Monsieur Mareuil to the chateau's upstairs tasting room, a place often visited by Napoleon. As I gazed out the Renaissance windows onto the impeccably manicured lawns, I lifted a shimmering flute of Moet bubbly to my lips, only to be interrupted by my host. "An important element of excellent champagne is the millions of bubbles rising to the top - bubbles that can take years to laboriously produce,"

said Monsieur Mareuil in heavily French-accented English. “And right now, you cannot see the bubbles because of the way your big hand is holding the glass.”

I had indeed been holding the delicate champagne glass the same way a hardy stevedore grips a mug-full of stein in a German beer-hall.

Monsieur Mareuil then delicately peeled each of my fingers one-by-one off the glass and delicately repositioned them to clutch the stem. I was then known as “Count Finger-Peel de Moet Chandon,” for the remainder of the trip by my friends and fellow travelers.

Once the mid-afternoon tasting was over, I drove about 60 miles southeast to the medieval city of Troyes, a gorgeous town of gothic gabled roofs, narrow cobbled alleyways and small courtyards brimming with flowers. The municipality has the largest concentration of medieval timber in the construction of its houses than any town in Europe. Once a center for international trade in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Troyes later became famous for its School of Sculpture in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, whose artists embellished the churches, cathedrals and museums with hundreds of distinctive works. The city was also noted for its stained glass window-making and now houses the richest heritage of listed stained glass windows in France - more than 10,000.

The town, situated in a bend of the river Seine, also has several important museums including the Museum of Modern Art which displays paintings, drawings and sculptures by such artists as Degas, Derain, Cezanne and Braque.

I spent many hours walking the tiny streets, ducking into chocolate shops, sampling cheeses, and reveling in dozens of Renaissance mansions, covered in the original facing of dark brick and white chalk - the famous Champagne “chessboard” pattern. I lingered at several cafes at the town’s center, munching on croissants, sipping the strong local coffee and watching the bustle of the local inhabitants.

My small hotel, Le Champ des Oiseaux, was ensconced in a jumble of 15<sup>th</sup> century houses in the middle of a small alley. Its timbered facade, eclectic wooden interior and polished floor-boards made me feel like a traveling Renaissance prince. Rates for the 12 suites range from approximately \$80 to \$140 per double. (Website: [www.champdeoiseaux.com](http://www.champdeoiseaux.com))

On the way back to Paris, I decided to sample some real lordly living. The Chateau d’Etoges is a 300-year-old castle - a privileged place where the Kings of France used to stay when heading east. Louis XIV admired the beauty of the gardens, fountains and ponds. Napoleon’s court often entertained nobility here. Gorgeous brick towers, tapestry-hung walls and a river running below my bedroom window, reeked of royalty.

The prices were unbelievable. A stately room with breakfast and dinner costs about \$90. ([www.etoges.com](http://www.etoges.com)) There was hardly a tourist to be found. Most travelers to France think Paris, Burgundy or the Loire Valley, but in the land of Champagne, there are cheap chateaus, superb food, friendly locals and crates of inexpensive champagne.

The land of liquid gold has never seemed more appealing.