



*With its soft rolling hills and emerald vines, a trip to Champagne in France is a glorious experience – and that’s before you’ve tasted the bubbly, as **Rufus Purdy** discovers*

message in a bottle



‘Too much of anything is bad, but too much Champagne is just right,’ the US writer Mark Twain once said.

It’s a shame he’s not around today, then, as he would have loved a tour of France’s Champagne region – this trip around the home of the world’s most famous sparkling wine offers infinite opportunities to knock back the bubbles. And, with Christmas just around the corner, it also gives Champagne aficionados the chance to purchase bottles direct from the producer for significantly less than they’d pay in the UK. This, I admit, is my prime motivation for joining the tour. If I can return home with a bottle or three of premium Perrier-Jouët or Pol Roger with which to treat my family on Christmas Day, then this might be the year that the budget bubbly my grandma usually inflicts upon us is discreetly left in the kitchen.

I arrive in the region via TGV from Paris – a 45-minute trip during which I watch the capital’s scruffy banlieue give way satisfyingly to the lush, green plains of northern France’s agricultural heartlands. As we glide into Champagne, the view from the train’s window becomes even more pleasing to the eye. Here, hills roll gently in the same way as Nick Drake sings gently – there’s a softness and delicacy to the landscape that soothes and thrills in equal measures. The hillsides are smothered in vines of dense, dark-green. Planted in



stark, geometrical lines, they look as though they've been combed.

It's on these chalky inclines that the Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier grapes (upon which the region's reputation has been forged) flourish beneath skies that send down as much sunlight as they do rain. Plucked by hand every September, these grapes then begin a journey from basket to table that can take the best part of a decade. The glass of Henri Giraud Fût de Chêne I'm poured upon our tour group's arrival at the Le Théâtre restaurant in Epernay is made solely from the fruit of the 1999 harvest. It's strange to think that the wine that's sending citric tangs across my palate was first poured into a bottle when people were still buying records by Billie Piper and the Vengaboys.

I'd imagined we'd eat well – this is France, after all – but the food at Le Théâtre is far better than I'd expected to find in an area so dominated by wine. There may not be much in the way of regional specialities on a menu

dominated by French classics, but the chefs certainly aren't afraid to sprinkle in the fizzy stuff to give the dishes a local flavour. My cassoulet of snails is served with a refreshingly light Champagne and almond sauce. The steak tartare I choose for a main course is as good as I've had anywhere in France, and turns out to be the perfect accompaniment to the sunset-coloured Leclerc Briant Rubis de Noirs Brut Rosé 2003 that fizzes lightly in front of me.

Several glasses later, we emerge on to the streets of Epernay, a pleasant but functional town that acts as the Champagne industry's main marketplace. We cross the Marne and make our way over to the famous Avenue de Champagne. Here, behind iron filigree gates and shaded by trees that wave dreamily in the light afternoon breeze, stand the grand, 19th-century homes of the great Champagne houses. Constructed to look like the chateaux of the country's ancient regime, and incorporating all manner of



PREVIOUS PAGE: The gently rolling landscape; sweet Champagne grapes.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The fermenting barrels get topped up at Bollinger; the vineyards of Champagne; a statue of the Benedictine monk

Dom Pérignon – the vintage Champagne named after him is produced by Moët et Chandon.

The magnificent Champagne houses of Bollinger (right) in the village of Aÿ; and Pol Roger (below).

BELOW: A Bollinger stone marks the famous vineyard.



head with Christian, Bollinger's mildly eccentric marketing director. Picking and eating grapes from the vines as he walks, he tells us, in between spitting out pips, about how Champagne is made today. I have to admit I'm a little lost. Christian is an engaging and informative guide, but once he starts to describe what happens once the grapes leave the fields and go into those giant steel vats, I find myself wishing I'd paid attention in my GCSE chemistry class.

What's important, though, is the end product. And, after a quick tour of the dark, subterranean cellars that snake like badger setts beneath the pavements and homes of Aÿ, our tour group is led back up to the surface to taste Bollinger's wares. We all troop into the company's tasting room, a gorgeous tower-top space into which the late-summer light floods through stained-glass windows, and quench the thirst we've built up with glasses of crisp, cold Bollinger Brut NV and the company's deliciously fruity rosé. The loudest noises of pleasure, though, are reserved for the final glass of Grande Année 2000 – a vintage of which Christian is particularly proud. He's right to be. Its taste is like grapefruit and crisp, green apples being zested into warm liquid honey.

The next morning, head a little heavy from all the wine consumed the day before, I decide to eschew a visit to another producer and explore our city base of Reims instead. Champagne at breakfast may be fine for the Marie Antoinettes of this world, but I've been brought up on strong coffee – and I'm dying to drink something that isn't cold and fizzy. So, as my fellow wine explorers head off on their bus, I find a pavement café on the Rue de l'Etape and settle down with my Gallic breakfast and café au lait.

Reims, on first inspection, seems like a miniature version of Paris. The streets of its old town creep out from the enormous Gothic cathedral that dominates the city's skyline, and shop windows nestle snugly beneath soaring 1920s edifices and elegantly carved archways. There's even a Galeries Lafayette department store on rue de Vesle, from which pour chic, black-clad women clutching bags bearing the logos of Chanel, Galliano and Agnès B. I drift between shops for a while, toying with the idea of buying some baby clothes for my daughter, but the prices are way beyond what you'd expect to find in a small provincial outpost. Reims, it

“The Champagne houses look like the chateaux of the ancient regime”



statuary foliage and fountains into their elegant forecourts, these houses – belonging to the likes of Moët & Chandon, Pol Roger, Mercier and Perrier-Jouët – are bricks-and-mortar reflections of their owners' expensive tastes.

Nowhere is this truer than at Bollinger, a short drive from Epernay. Here, the vats, cellars and barrel rooms are hidden behind the kind of colonial-style façade that looks as though it should be the country residence of a retired Napoleonic-era general. It's actually the former home of industry grande dame Madame Lily Bollinger, who became something of a one-woman PR machine for Champagne during her world travels in the early 20th century. 'I drink it when I'm happy and when I'm sad,' she famously said. 'Sometimes I drink it when I'm alone. When I have company, I consider it obligatory. I trifle with it if I'm not hungry and drink it when I am. Otherwise, I never touch it – unless I'm thirsty.'

Madame Lily's personal vineyard stands in front of the house. And it is to here we



seems, refuses to see itself as some hokey backwater. This is the country's Champagne capital, and everything about its small city centre is as unashamedly upmarket as the wine itself.

The kings of France – from Clovis in 496AD to Charles X in 1825 – who were crowned here certainly thought so. And it's to their coronation site, the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Reims, that I head next. En route, I pass the UNESCO-listed Palais du Tau, a beautiful tawny-coloured chateau that would be called imposing were it not dwarfed by the sky-tickling towers and steeples next door. The cathedral is magnificent – judged on scale alone, it would still be one of Europe's most visually impressive religious sites. But, what with its spectacular stained-glass windows, eerie rood carvings of miserable sinners meeting gruesome ends on Judgement Day and splashes of gold that glitter in the light of hundreds of candles, it exudes as much beauty as it does power.

I wonder whether the Champenois labourers who tunnelled beneath the city streets to create the cellars for the house of Lanson had the cathedral in mind as they dug. Back with the rest of the tour group, I wander through the maze of passages below the prestigious producer's parkside headquarters, and can't help but notice just how much the long passageways with their curved roofs resemble the nave I've left behind. It strikes me how like a church it is down here, a subterranean temple in which the work of all those who live and work in the region – the vine-growers, grape-pickers, blenders, tasters, bottle-packers, cork-stuffers and others who make their living from Champagne – comes together to venerate the world's most blessed of wines.

Stacks of dust-shrouded bottles line every wall, the inverted domes of their bases glistening like tear-brimming eyes from all the moisture in the air, while the ceilings hang with funereal crêpes of black mould – natural insulation, we're told – which sways gently as we pass underneath. In an alcove at the end of one tunnel, barely perceptible behind the crates of green glass piled high in front of her, stands a tiny statue of the Virgin Mary. She makes an apt symbol. Up at ground level, the people of Champagne may be looking heavenwards, but down here all the spiritual enrichment they need is to be found in those bottles.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Spectacular stained glass at Reims Cathedral; on the Champagne tourist route; Pol Roger cellars; the Cathedral dominates the skyline.



Champagne Wine Tour

Greenbee Specialist Travel has a five-day tour of Champagne from 9-13 June, accompanied by Master of Wine and former Waitrose Head of Wine Buying, Julian Brind. Prices from £1,875:

Day 1 To Reims Travel from London to Paris by Eurostar and on to Reims by TGV. Stay at the Grand Hotel des Templiers for 4 nights.

Day 2 Reims & Epernay Tasting and lunch at Pol Roger. Tour of House of Lanson.

Day 3 Aj & Epernay Visit to Bollinger, with tasting and lunch. Afternoon in Epernay.

Day 4 Reims & Verzy Visit to cellars of Veuve Cliquot and walking tour of Reims. Dinner at Manoir de Verzy.

Day 5 To London Travel to Paris by TGV and Eurostar to London.

The Champagne tour is one of a range of tours developed by Greenbee Specialist Travel and Waitrose Wine Buyers. Prices start from £1,275 for a five-day tour of Tuscany. For more details, or to request a brochure, visit greenbee.com/winetours or call 0845 610 0341 to speak to an expert.