

The Mercedes Wine Tour



Champagne Country

In the first of a new Mercedes-sponsored series exploring the world's great wine regions, Nick Tarayan heads to Champagne in a C220 CDI

I first visited the Champagne region as a hotel school student in 1977, the year of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Twenty of us piled on to a dusty old bus, which was weighed down by a roof rack loaded with tents, cooking stoves and suitcases. Just outside Epernay, about a mile from the Moët & Chandon playing fields – which were going to be our campsite for three nights – the brakes on the bus seized. It was the coldest April for years, snow was thick on the ground, and I shall never forget trudging back and forth to the camp site with all the equipment, trying to break in my new cowboy boots.

There was an altogether more auspicious start to my recent visit – this time in the year of the Golden Jubilee. A shiny, silver Mercedes C220 CDI had been delivered to my home and on a sunny Friday afternoon, with excited anticipation, we took to the road with a soft but business-like purr.

Getting out of London has not improved

in 25 years. The route down through Greenwich and Bexley to the M20 is worse than ever but the stop-start nature of the journey gave me ample time to discover the myriad buttons and gizmos which James Bond's colleague Q would have adored. My favourite (simple things for simple minds) was the button on the dashboard which lowers the rear headrests when you want to reverse into a parking space.

The M20 was completely clear and the 50 miles to Folkestone were eaten up in as many minutes, when the lunar landscape of the Euro Tunnel station was soon looming. I was a Channel Tunnel virgin and the whole idea of driving a car onto a platform and into a train seemed rather odd, but it was a complete dream and a model of efficiency. We were driving Club Class, which meant a separate, quicker check-in and a charming little lounge to go and sit in while we waited for the next departure. They give you coffee, newspapers and a little box of goodies for the trip. It's rather

like being in a fog-bound Biggin Hill in the Fifties – completely charming.

The trip took 35 minutes and we emerged straight on to the autoroute for Reims. The 170-mile journey took only just over two hours thanks to the effortless speed of the Merc.

Reims is an easy place to settle in to. There's a big, pedestrianised central square – the Place Drouet d'Erlon – where a host of bars and brasseries attract a lively crowd on a Friday evening. We were staying at the Holiday Inn Garden Court – a serviceable hotel – a 100 yards away.

For me, the essence of a good weekend away is how well it is punctuated by lunch and dinner, with the odd stop-off at a decent bar. I'm greedy like that, despite having the appetite of a sparrow. So off it was to Brasserie Flo, an outpost of the popular Paris chain, where you feel as though you've just stepped into a film set depicting the bustling French eateries of the late 19th century. A huge platter of



his charming daughter, Emmanuelle, came out to greet us. It is always rather disconcerting when you meet grand winemakers; they're really just posh, passionate farmers and far more down-to-earth than you expect. Claude is 12th generation of the Giraud-Hémart family, whose roots in Aÿ go back almost 400 years. He has recently decided to open up the distribution of his fabulous wines, which were formerly reserved for private clients in France and Italy.

Henri Giraud is one of the very few houses to still use oak casks in the production of Champagne. After very gentle pressing (he only gets about 75 per cent of the quantity of the Champenoise norm), he ferments the wine in barrels and leaves the wine to mature for 12 months. The second fermentation, which gives Champagne its bubbles, takes place in the distinctive 'pomponne' bottle, which eventually ends up on your table. The Cuvée Fût de Chêne is then left in the cellars to mature for about six years – 1993 is the current vintage – after which it is disgorged and its cork held back in place with a 24ct gold staple as a rather grand gesture.

We had a rare opportunity of tasting some of last year's harvest, which is still in cask. It was a wonderfully creamy wine

on first sip, with aromas of vanilla and ripe pear, followed by a salvo of piercing acidity. I still find it incredible that Champagne winemakers can tell the amount of acidity which will 'hold' the wine for the extraordinary length of time it has to spend in bottle so that, at the end of its maturation, the wine develops a rich, round, sensuous effervescence.

After this, we headed for the Avenue de Champagne: 'the most drinkable avenue in the world', according to Sir Winston Churchill. The avenue is full of the grandest houses and driving up it is like passing through a Champagne role of honour: Moët

CHAMPAGNE GRAPES

There are only three grapes allowed in the making of Champagne. Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier are both red (the skins have to be removed immediately after pressing as they contain the colour); they tend to be grown in the area around Reims. Chardonnay is white and tends to be grown around Epernay to the south of the region.

Chardonnay: gives elegance and finesse to the wine.

Pinot Noir: gives structure and weight.

Pinot Meunier: develops more quickly and has a slightly rustic character.

Most Non-Vintage blends are made up of a third of each variety. Most vintage wines use Pinot Noir and Chardonnay exclusively.

oysters was washed down with a glass of the local wine – well, Champagne, which is local here. We shared a simple, butter-soft Châteaubriand and managed to down a bottle of 1990 Bouzy Rouge – a red wine made from the Pinot Noir grapes grown in the aptly named village of Bouzy, a few miles down the road.

The following morning, with our first appointment in Aÿ, one of the villages adjacent to the other capital city of the region, Epernay, we stopped off at the Royal Champagne hotel at Champillon for breakfast. Looking down from the top of the Montagne de Reims, with views of the magnificent vineyards spilling down into Epernay itself, seemed a glamorous start to the day.

We then made tracks to the vineyards of Aÿ. The villages in Champagne are graded to reflect the quality of the grapes which they produce. With a grade of 95 to 100 per cent, the label is allowed to state that the wine is a 'Grand Cru'; anything below 80 per cent doesn't get a look in. Aÿ is one of only 17 villages – out of a total of 257 – with the maximum grade of 100 per cent and is home to the tiny Champagne house of Henri Giraud.

Under normal circumstances, you would pass the house without a second glance. There are no gilded gates or grand facades: it is a simple, small affair set back from the road and looks rather like a farm shop in deepest Suffolk. Owner Claude Giraud and

HOW CHAMPAGNE IS MADE



Grape Harvest: Mid-September to early October.

Grape Pressing: Only three pressings of the grapes are allowed. The best Champagne comes from the first pressing.

Fermentation: The grape juice undergoes a first fermentation, usually in stainless steel, to be converted into wine. This process takes two to three weeks, and is usually done from October-February.

Blending: Following initial fermentation, the winemaker selects various wines and creates a blend in keeping with the house style. The

blended wine is put into its permanent bottle, a mixture of yeast and sugar is added and the bottle is temporarily capped.

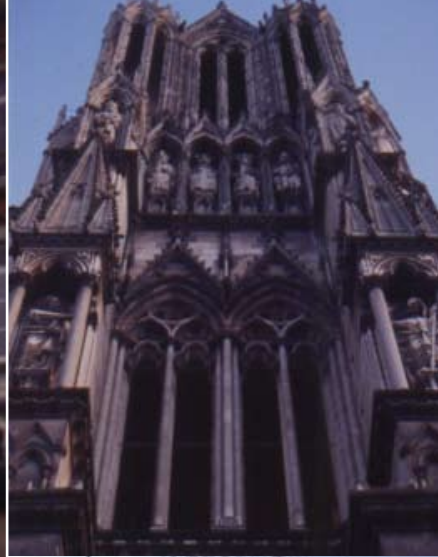
Second Fermentation: The yeast and sugar react to form carbon dioxide, which cannot escape from the bottle and forces its way back into the wine, creating the bubbles. The yeast dies and forms a sediment.

Remuage: After suitable ageing, the bottles are occasionally turned and slowly tilted upside down to allow the sediment to fall near the cap.

Dégorgement: The neck of the

bottle is submersed in a salt-ice solution to freeze the wine near the cap. The cap is removed, and the pressure built up inside the bottle from the carbon dioxide forces the frozen sediment, and a little of the wine, out of the bottle.

Remplissage: The bottle is now topped up with the dosage, a reserve wine and sugar mixture. At this point the winemaker can alter the wine's sweetness. The bottle is then recorked with its permanent cork and allowed to rest on its side for 4-6 months prior to labelling and being offered for sale.



& Chandon, Perrier-Jouët, Heidsieck Monopole, de Venoge, Mercier and Demoiselle all sit behind their wrought iron gates while the curious tower which symbolises the house of de Castellane looms skyward in the distance. Our next visit was to Sir Winston's favourite, Pol Roger. We were greeted by Christian Pol-Roger and Hubert de Billy who are the great ambassadors of the still privately-owned house.

In common with the other houses on the Avenue, the real attractions lie deep below the road in cellars which run for miles. These maintain a constant temperature of around 12°C and good humidity throughout the year: the perfect conditions for slowly maturing the wines.

We enjoyed a glass of the Non-Vintage on the terrace until the rain started and, not wishing to dilute the wine, we took a seat in the grand salon, where Christian proudly opened a bottle of his 1995 vintage. There is a theme which runs through the wines of Pol Roger which I have always thought of as mocha. It's there on the first sniff and comes through on the palate as a toasty, creamy flavour.

Champagne is a blended wine. The aim of every producer is to maintain a house style, which will taste the same year in, year out, wherever in the world you drink it. Each house reserves a certain amount of wine from each vintage and blends it in with each new harvest. At Pol Roger, they use around 20 to 30 per cent reserve wine in the Non-Vintage blend to create the required consistency of flavour. Vintage Champagne is only made in exceptional years and contains only the wines from

that particular year's harvest. These wines also tend to be made from the best grapes of the harvest and are aged for longer in the cellars, meaning they tend to be richer than their non-vintage counterparts.

It had been a busy day of cellar walking and tasting but we still had enough time to get back to Reims and visit the Cathedral of Notre Dame. I've visited several times over the years and never tire of the extraordinary building which dates back to the early 13th century. Reims has been on the frontline of many wars but none so destructive as the First World War when it was bombed to a shell. Marc Chagall was one of the artists commissioned to produce new stained-glass windows during the Cathedral's restoration and the vivid colours bring an almost surreal light to the density of the interior stone.

After a short rest, we set off for the culinary highlight of the trip, Gérard Boyer's wonderful Les Crayères, originally the home of Louise Pommery, whose Champagne house is just across the road.

Les Crayères has three Michelin stars and deserves every one of them. A glass of Champagne in the fin-de-siècle conservatory was followed by a meal punctuated with foie gras and truffles at every mouthful. And the wine list is a revelation: positively cheap by London standards.

The next morning was extraordinarily beautiful. Bright sunshine and a warm breeze. It was perfect for a drive along the Route de Champagne, passing through the Grand Cru villages of Verzenay, Verzy, Sillery and Bouzy, a peaceful route where many of the villages pay tribute to those

Shots from the tour, including (far left) the Mercedes C220 CDI outside Pol Roger, (centre top) the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Reims, and (above) Nick Tarayan, Christian Pol-Roger and Hubert de Billy

who perished in the Great War which was fought on the plains here. The windmill of Verzenay – a look-out point for the Allies – stands high on a hill, buffeted by the winds which blow over those plains.

Then on to Ambonnay and lunch at the Auberge St-Vincent, a charming, very French little hotel-restaurant. The theme was floral in the extreme but it didn't detract from a deliciously simple meal of

CONTACTS & INFO

A useful Champagne website: www.champagnemagic.com

will give you a huge list of Champagne producers. Click on their names and you will be directed to their website. Most houses close their doors to visitors during the winter months and, being France, this applies particularly at weekends when most of us want to visit. Make sure you check before you go.

Another is: www.champagne.fr, which is the official site of the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne and tells you all there is to know about Champagne in four languages.

Eurotunnel: www.eurotunnel.com or 08705 35 35 35 for direct reservations.

MERCEDES C220 CDI

0-62.5 MPH: 10 seconds

Top Speed: 138mph

Power(BHP): 143

Price: From £23,675

For more details visit www.mercedes.com

WHERE TO STAY & EAT AROUND REIMS & EPERNAY

Where to stay

REIMS

Les Crayères

64 Boulevard Henry-Vasnier
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 82 80 80
Fabulous food first; fabulous rooms second. From around £180 per room per night.

Grand Hôtel des Templiers

22 rue des Templiers
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 88 55 08
This is a 'hotel de charme' centrally located in Reims. Probably the best address after Les Crayères. From around £110 per room per night.

L'Assiette Champenoise

40 Avenue Paul-Valliant Couturier, Reims-Tinquex
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 84 64 64
More traditional Michelin-starred food and grand rooms. From around £92 per room per night*.

Holiday Inn Garden Court

46 rue Buirette
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 78 99 99
A perfectly serviceable hotel as long as you don't have breakfast. From £64 per room per night*.

EPERNAY

Le Royal Champagne

Champillon
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 52 87 11
The grandest hotel with the grandest views over Epernay – and a Michelin-starred restaurant to boot. From £102 per room per night.

Le Clos Raymi

3 rue Joseph de Venoge
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 51 00 58
A charming boutique hotel which offers a great welcome and great value. From around £65 per room per night.

Hotel de Champagne

30 rue Eugène Mercier
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 53 10 60
A friendly and pleasant place to be in the centre of town. Around £50 per room per night.

(*special rates from www.octopustravel.com which also features other Reims hotels.)

EPERNAY CHAMPAGNE HOUSES

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------|
| 1. Marne & Champagne | 5. Pol Roger |
| 2. Moët & Chandon | 6. de Castellane |
| 3. Perrier-Jouët | 7. Mercier |
| 4. de Venoge | 8. Trouillard |

REIMS CHAMPAGNE HOUSES

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Heidsieck Monopole | 11. Jacquesson |
| 2. GH Mumm | 12. Piper Heidsieck |
| 3. Charles Heidsieck | 13. Delbeck |
| 4. Irroy | 14. Taittinger |
| 5. Krug | 15. Charles Heidsieck |
| 6. Lanson | 16. Ruinart Père et Fils |
| 7. Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin | 17. Pommery & Greno |
| 8. Louis Roederer | 18. Henriot |
| 9. Massé | 19. Abel Lepitre |
| 10. Lanson | 20. Veuve Clicquot |

Where to eat

REIMS

Les Crayères

as above
Sensational, but be prepared to spend £100 per head with wine.

Café du Palais

14 place Myron-Herrick
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 47 52 54
A father and son team run this excellent brasserie which comes highly recommended

Brasserie Flo

96 place Drout d'Erlon
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 91 40 50
A posh and proper Parisienne-style brasserie. Around £75 for two with wine.

EPERNAY

Le Royal Champagne

as above
Michelin-starred, great views and worthy food at around £120 for two with wine.

La Briqueterie

Route de Sézanne, Vinay (a few miles south of Epernay)
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 59 99 99
Another fab place to dine in grand-ish surroundings (an old brick works) for around £100 for two with wine.

Les Berceaux

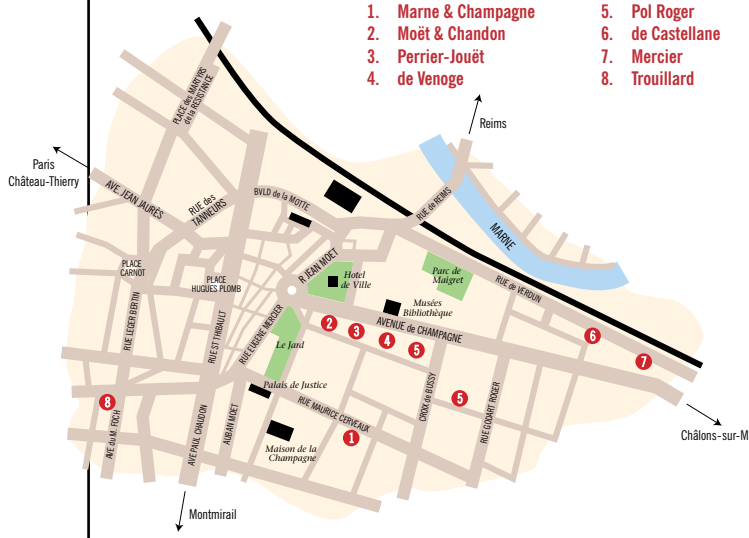
13 rue Berceaux
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 55 28 84
Heavily-beamed and recently starred, in the centre of town.

La Table Kobus

3 rue du Docteur Rousseau
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 51 53 53

Le Théâtre

8 place Mendès France
Tel: (00 33) 03 26 58 88 19



terrines and coq-au-vin d'Ambonnay (made with the local Pinot Noir). Madame, immaculate in twin-set and pearls, ruled the restaurant with an iron fist in a velvet glove.

Sadly, it was time for the journey home. In 10 minutes we were back in Reims and a couple of hours later preparing to enter the tunnel. We'd left a wine producing area which still exports more of its wares to the UK than to any other country (over 25 million bottles last year, which is up by

a massive 22 per cent on 2000). We did try to stop off to buy some goodies at the huge Cité Europe complex but discovered it is closed on Sundays! So, the cavernous boot of the Mercedes had to go hungry.

Getting into London on a Sunday night proved easy, which meant that, after enjoying a good lunch in Champagne country, we were home in time for *Antiques Roadshow*, our enjoyment of the weekend swelled by our sleek car. A vast improvement on 1977. **SM**

STOCKISTS

Henri Giraud Cuvée Fût de Chêne 1993 is available from The Caviar House (161 Piccadilly SW1, Tel: 7409 0445) and Justerini & Brooks (61 St James's Street SW1, Tel: 7484 6400). Restaurants carrying the wine include: Gordon Ramsay, The Square, Le Gavroche and Adam Street.

Pol Roger: from most good wine merchants and even more good restaurateurs. Enquiries: 01432 262800.