



BUBBLE ECONOMY

Exploring France's famous and luxurious champagne houses will seduce your senses. Lara Brunt raises a glass in style.



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AS ONE SLOWLY descends the stone steps into the ghostly lit tunnel, the temperature noticeably drops. Your eyes adjust and fall upon rows of wooden A-frames holding thousands of dusty bottles of the world's most celebrated drink.

The underground *crayères* (chalk pit cellars) of Champagne Taittinger in Reims, in the heart of northeastern France's Champagne region, were originally carved out by the Gallo-Romans in the 4th century, and later used by the Benedictine monks of Saint Nicaise Abbey in the 13th century. They have lost none of their mystique over the centuries.

Synonymous with luxury and glamour, and coveted by royalty and rap stars alike, champagne seduces long

before the cork is popped. Perhaps it's the unyielding Gallic embrace of traditional techniques - machines are forbidden, with all grapes harvested by hand at a time dictated by the region's Champagne Bureau - or the slick and sexy marketing campaigns of the world-famous brands such as Taittinger and Moët & Chandon. Whatever it is, champagne is steadfastly in fashion, despite the worldwide economic gloom, and none more so than in the emerging economies of China, Russia, India and Brazil.

"We produce 5.5 million bottles per year and export about 75 per cent," the guide Géraldine Theron says, as she walks through a section of Taittinger's four kilometres of cellars, 20 metres underground, where the temperature



is a naturally constant 12 degrees celsius. "The grapes are harvested in September by village and by variety - chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier, the only grape varieties permitted in Champagne." The grapes are pressed and transferred to large vats in the modern cellar nearby, where a natural fermentation occurs. "In February, the Taittinger family and the head winemaker will taste the wines and prepare the blends that will make up the range," she says.

Strolling through the tunnels, we pass dark alcoves, each piled high with more than 70,000 neatly stacked bottles. It is here that the wine will ferment for a second time and produce their bubbles, in a process known as *prise de mousse* ("capturing the sparkle"). They will age for three to four years for the Brut Réserve and almost 10 years for the finest Comtes de Champagne vintage cuvée, before

being moved to the A-frame racks to be gradually turned neck-down to remove the sediment.

Appreciating this delicate process makes tasting champagne all the more sweet. "Champagne is a celebration drink. I don't know anyone who is sad when they drink champagne," says Julien Breuzon, export manager at Champagne Vollereaux. "We call it our early morning and late evening champagne, because it tastes great at any time." It sums up the spirit of Champagne - for locals, the drink is a pleasurable way of life, not just a drink for special occasions.

While Vollereaux's cellars, carved out by monks after the French Revolution in 1799, are just as atmospheric as its big-name rival, there is an undis-

covered feel. French aficionados consume most of the 450,000 bottles produced each year; however, Vollereaux has just started exporting to Hong Kong and the mainland, after partnering with Xiamen-based distributor Pack Yick International Wine.

"It's just the beginning for us, but we expect China to become one of our biggest markets, if not the biggest. The potential is extraordinary," says Breuzon. Indeed, in 2010, China imported more champagne than Russia. But, while Russians tend to prefer the well-known labels, Breuzon hopes the



Clockwise from left: Champagne aging in Taittinger's cellars; the romantic Jeanne-Charlotte suite at Château Les Aulnois; Elisabeth Vollereaux in the reception room at Château Les Aulnois; a stained glass window in Champagne Taittinger's cellars; and Château Les Aulnois, as seen from the garden. Images: Glen Pearson.

Chinese will be more willing to embrace boutique brands. "We want to highlight the fact that we are a family winery, very traditional and independent," he says.

It is this family connection that brings visitors to Vollereaux in the first place, after checking in at the 18th-century Château Les Aulnois. The owner, Elisabeth Vollereaux, was born at the family's estate just a few hundred metres from the château, and spent her childhood working the 40 hectares of rolling vineyards. While her brother Pierre now manages the

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sixth-generation champagne house, she spent four years meticulously restoring the château to its former splendour, before throwing open its doors to visitors in 2009.

Les Aulnois' five guest rooms bear the names of its former mistresses. One of the most popular is the Jeanne-Charlotte suite, named after the wife of Tirant de Flavigny, a champagne producer who bought the château in 1791. It's a tasteful blend of traditional French charm and contemporary luxury, with Toile de Jouy wallpaper and original fireplaces sitting

comfortably alongside wet room and wi-fi. The gleaming claw-foot bath is positioned “so you can look out over the gardens as you sip champagne,” says Vollereaux. There can be few things more deliciously decadent than sipping chilled bubbles, knowing they were painstakingly produced just a stone’s throw away, while soaking in soapy bubbles.

“During my childhood the gates were always closed,” she says. “One day I saw inside the gardens...” Her voice trails off. It’s easy to see how Les Aulnois could beguile, with such sparkling marvels as the enormous 18th-century grape press in one of the adjoining outbuildings. It was last used in 1930, after which the château’s vineyards were sold off as a consequence of the global economic depression. “But I’m sure it could work again,” she says with a determined glint in her eye, and one can’t help but think that champagne is in her DNA. **■**

Champagne Taittinger: 9 Place Saint-Nicaise, Reims, taittinger.com. Tour and tasting from €14.

Champagne Vollereaux: 48 Rue Leon Bourgeois, Pierry, champagne-vollereaux.fr. Tasting from €7.

Château Les Aulnois: 61 Rue du Général de Gaulle, Pierry, ila-chateau.com/aulnois. The Jean-Charlotte suite costs €280, including breakfast. On Saturday evenings, guests can join Vollereaux at la table d’hôtes (the host’s table) as she prepares a three-course menu, featuring local seasonal produce and champagne matched to each course (€95 per person).

Getting there: Air France operates 12 weekly flights from Hong Kong to Paris, airfrance.com. Champagne is about 140kms northeast of Paris.

When to go: High season is Mar-Oct; harvest is late Aug-Sept; low season is Nov-Feb. Bookings recommended.

SAMPLING THE SPARKLE

Champagne’s vineyards are concentrated mainly around Épernay and Reims in the department of Marne, but also extend into the less prestigious Aube and Aisne departments.

Elegant Épernay provides ample opportunity for dégustation (tasting) and subterranean cellar tours. Luxury labels along the handsome Avenue de Champagne include Moët & Chandon (number 20, moët.com, tour and tasting from €15), Mercier (number 68-70, champagnemercier.fr, tour and tasting from €10), and De Castellane (number 63, castellane.com, tour and tasting from €8.50).

Historic Reims, 25kms north of Épernay, has witnessed the coronation of generations of French monarchs in the gothic Notre Dame Cathedral. The chalk caves store the wares of exclusive brands such as Charles Heidsieck (charlesheidsieck.com, by appointment only), Pommery (pommery.fr, tour and tasting from €12), and Mumm (ghmumm.com, tour and tasting from €10).

Heading west out of Épernay along the scenic wine route, the glamour of Avenue de Champagne soon gives way to the sleepy villages and hillsides of the Marne Valley. Here, individual winemakers, village cooperatives and world-renowned brands all tend to their precious vines side-by-side in Champagne’s largest grape-growing region.

Make sure to stop off at Champagne Dom Caudron (domcaudron.fr, tour and tasting €5), a small cooperative in the village of Passy Grigny, 25kms from Épernay. “The cooperative was created in 1929 by the priest of the village, Dom Caudron, who gave the villagers 1,000 francs to purchase a press,” says marketing manager Julie Valliet. More than 80 per cent of the 320 inhabitants are winemakers, working together to produce 100,000 bottles a year, and they’re happy to show off its shiny modern presses and production methods. But tradition still rules the day, and the population swells during the harvest. “The atmosphere is wonderful,” Valliet says.

The region’s famous address (bottom) and a glass of bubbly (below) from Champagne Dom Caudron.

