

# TRAVEL

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A self-drive champagne-tasting trip? It sounded like a literal crash course. I would need to get airbags fitted to the outside of the car, to be sure I would bounce off oncoming vehicles and vineyards.

Before investing, though, I enquired further, and heard the good news: that we would be walking between the champagne houses, so there was no danger of crashing, getting Breathalyzed or — worse — having to limit my tasting to one sip per glass. The only driving I would do was to the village of Ay (pronounced “ah-ye”), near Epemay, which is home to some 30 champagne houses. These include some of the big boys, such as Deutz and Bollinger, but this tour is designed to shun the famous labels and focus on the small, independent producers.

In the run-up to the festive season — or before a wedding or big party — it's hard to think of a better weekend break. It is still possible to snap up bargain-price bottles that, first, don't have any tell-tale supermarket branding on them, and second, actually taste rather fine. The more you buy the more you save. You just have to get to Ay. Perhaps this is the perfect trip for our chastened times, a holiday that's simultaneously decadent and financially prudent — a credit-crunch-busting orgy of champagne.

## CHAMPAGNE FACTS

First stop, our chateau hotel, to meet our guide, the *tres charmante* Caroline Guizelin-Brun, owner of the Roger Brun champagne house, fluent English-speaker and fount of local knowledge.

It's 6pm, aperitif time, and Caroline welcomes us with a champagne bouquet: five gold-capped bottles on ice. So I am somewhat confused by her first question. “Which do you prefer,” she asks, “Chardonnay or Pinot Noir?”

“Er no, champagne, please,” I reply, and sense from Guizelin-Brun's patient smile that this isn't quite the right answer. She explains: pure Chardonnay champagnes are very light and fizzy. Pure Pinot Noirs are stronger-flavored, fruitier. Pinot Meunier is usually added less for its taste than to help with the ageing process. Most champagnes are blends of two or more of these grapes.

It is the first lesson in a weekend of champagne facts that will get your head reeling even more effectively than the bubbles will. It dawns on me that I have come here with shamefully vague notions of what champagne really is, and although I have visited the most famous houses in nearby Reims, I have never truly thought about different types of champagne beyond “white,” “pink,” “dry,” “sweet,” “special-offer” and “bloody expensive.”

Guizelin-Brun pops a bottle of Mumm. It's a Chardonnay-rich blend, she tells us, because it's always best to start a tasting with the lightest champagne. After our long drive, it is wonderfully crisp and refreshing, and it's not until I have almost emptied my glass that I remember this is meant to be a tasting rather than a cocktail party. But it's not my fault for forgetting, because there is something missing. “Don't you have a bucket, so people can spit it out,” I ask, not that I have anything left to spit. Guizelin-Brun simply laughs.

Even so, I notice she isn't emptying her glass. Is there something wrong with it? “It's a perfectly acceptable champagne,” she says. “But in it there are grapes from 77 different crus or villages.” It's the same with most of the big brands, apparently — to maintain their reputation, they have to produce a wine that looks and tastes the same every year, so they blend and blend until they get the right formula. Caroline opens a second bottle, a pure Chardonnay by Michel Genet, and it is like turning on a light bulb. Where the big-name blend was crisp, this one zings. If that one was refreshing, this is a waterfall.

## A MAZE OF TUNNELS

This difference is what tomorrow's tour of the village is going to be all about. For the same price as one of the big-name brands, you can buy champagnes made with grapes from a single vineyard, or a blend of the producer's own grapes that is tailor-made to give a completely individual taste.

We meet next morning at 10.30 and stroll through the village to work up a thirst. The streets are lined with what look like miniature chateaux in high-walled courtyards. These are the champagne houses. Below our feet, Caroline says, is a maze of tunnels containing millions of bottles of maturing champagne. Until the World War II it was possible to cross the village through the cellars. The Nazis built walls down there because Resistance fighters were using the tunnels as secret passageways and, presumably, to get up Dutch courage.

We arrive at our first house, Goutorbe, which looks like, and is, a working farm at rest for winter. It is a million miles from the show-off



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In Champagne, the best bargains come straight from the cellars

BY STEPHEN CLARKE  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

### How to read a champagne bottle label:

- » **Vintage champagne** is not necessarily the best — it just means that it comes from one particular year. Non-vintage can be preferable, because many winemakers prefer to blend two years to give a better flavor, and only create a single-year champagne — also known as a *millesime* — if it's a particularly good one.
- » **Extra brut** means no sugar has been added. Brut is dry, with up to 12g of sugar per liter. Extra dry is actually not dry at all, with up to 18g of sugar per liter and demi sec can contain a syrupy 35g.
- » **Cru** means village or vineyard. The best vineyards are classed grand cru because of their sunlit, well-drained positions. A premier cru is almost as good. If neither is on the label, it's from a basic champagne vineyard.
- » **Cuvee** is the first pressing, giving the best juice from the flesh of the grape. *Premiere taille* is in fact the second pressing. *Blanc de blancs* means wine made from white (green) grapes. A *blanc de noirs* is white wine made from black grapes.
- » Some producers will include the words “**traces of egg**” on bottles destined for the UK. Egg white is put into fermented grape juice to force the biggest sediment to settle.

Warning: Excessive consumption of alcohol can damage your health

showrooms of Reims. We are taken on a tour of the chilly 17th-century cellars where thousands of bottles are lying on their sides fermenting, a dense crowd of green glass eyes.

Next we go to a warm lounge where several bottles are waiting on ice — aperitif time again. Two members of the Goutorbe family, Rene and his daughter Elisabeth, run us through their range of champagnes — their *cuvee* tradition, for example, a fruity blend of two-thirds Pinot Noir, one-third Chardonnay, and the *cuvee* prestige, aged for four years and therefore even richer in taste.

Rene takes a good measure of each wine before he lets us taste it, no doubt checking that it is perfect. Conversation bubbles, and we glean little gems of insider knowledge. For example, the bubblyness of a champagne has little to do with the wine itself — it's mostly down to the glass. For maximum fizz, you have to scratch the bottom of the glass with a drill or diamond. The imperfection will release a stream of bubbles. And the best glass from which to drink champagne is neither the tall flute (no room for your nose) nor the wide coupe (which lets the aromas and bubbles escape) but a tulip-shaped glass. Mine is certainly working efficiently, and as Guizelin-Brun takes us for another wander, the world feels a very mellow, tulip-shaped kind of place.

At the Roger Brun house next to the church, the first thing Guizelin-Brun's brother, Philippe, shows us is some lines painted in his yard. This isn't for visitors' cars, he tells us; it's because each different type of grape is brought to a separate space to await pressing. It is a grape park.

He takes us through the pressing room and down into the cellars to see his fermenting roses. Pink champagne glows through transparent glass, and a layer of sediment is clearly visible at the bottom of each bottle. This yeast will be removed, or *degorge*, he explains, by tipping the bottles downwards until the sediment collects in the neck, at which point the very end of the bottle is frozen so that the sediment is caught in an ice cube that will be expelled by the pressure of bubbles in the wine. Hey presto, clear bubbly. Human ingenuity knows no bounds when pleasure is at stake.

In the tasting room, Philippe and Caroline crack open a La Pelle extra brut, a powerful champagne made with Pinot Noir grapes from a single section of the vineyard, called La Pelle — the spade — because gravediggers used to leave their tools at the edge of the field. Philippe tells us how each type of grape does its magic. Chardonnay fizzes on the back teeth, Pinot Meunier works on the tongue, and Pinot Noir settles on the lips and gives a longer aftertaste.

## NOBLE TRADITION

I realize through the ever-thickening bubbly haze that this tour is not only alcoholic but highly educational. At a big champagne house, you will be told all about the brand's noble tradition, and the famous people who have drunk it. Here, you are talking to a man who loads his own grapes into the wine press, who tastes the juice at every stage of the production process and decides when to bottle each champagne. He is not just the organ-grinder; he made the organ.

After lunch, which is accompanied by Philippe's easy-to-drink — very easy-to-drink — brut reserve, we head, slowly but not all that surely, along the road so that Caroline can introduce us to Christian, one of the two brothers who run the Gosset-Brabant house.

They work opposite the imposing Bollinger chateau, but are proud of their smallness. Christian explains that he uses no herbicides on his vines and that the grapes are crushed in a hand-controlled press, to make doubly sure that the *cuvee*, the juice from the flesh, is separated out from the more bitter juices obtained around the pips and in the skin. Gosset-Brabant specializes in fruity, Pinot Noir-heavy champagnes, and Christian tastes his own wines with huge relish. “Peaches,” he exclaims at his reserve grand cru brut, and his rose premier cru reminds him that Ay is the Japanese word for love.

At the end of a day of “tasting” (that is, non-stop drinking), we all toast this idea heartily, though in the back of my mind is the recollection that Ay also sounds like the French word for “ouch.”

I needn't have worried, though. Champagne is pretty pure stuff, and contains very few sulphates, the chemical that causes wine hangovers. Next morning my head is light and as clear as a bell. My bank balance is also lighter, but I really don't mind. For far less than what I would pay in London for a good but anonymous household-name champagne, I have stocked up with bottles that I feel I know personally. I have selected them for their own characteristic taste. Hell, I could practically point out on a map where each grape was grown. And I know exactly where each bubble is going, too. Cheers!