



Above: crowds at the Champagne Festival in Epernay (photo © Ville d'Epernay); right: celebrations at Fêtes Johanniques (photo © Carmen Moya).

Champagne Drinking STARS



THE REGION'S NAME IS SYNONYMOUS WITH JOYOUS CELEBRATION, AND THIS YEAR TOO, **CHAMPAGNE** BRIMS WITH ACTIVE AND INDULGENT PURSUITS FOR THE VISITOR.
BY IAN PACKHAM

Just 150 kilometres east of Paris and easily reached by rail and road from the capital, the Champagne region is a haven for active travellers. Centred upon the towns of Reims and Epernay, its attractive landscape of gentle hills, winding rivers and forest habitats are dotted with points

of interest. Villages nestle amid the vineyards that have made this part of France famous across the globe. The rolling hills boast an extensive network of cycle paths and marked hiking routes, and the rivers and lakes provide the perfect setting for getting active in and on the water.



EPERNAY – CHAMPAGNE'S HEARTLAND

Though the gothic cathedral at Reims has witnessed the coronation of 25 kings of France, it is Epernay that is known throughout the world as the 'Capital of Champagne'. A 30-minute drive or train ride from Reims, the small town lies at the meeting point of the three most important areas of champagne viniculture. Here you'll find the esteemed kilometre-long Avenue de Champagne, a UNESCO-inscribed World Heritage Site.

This so-called 'Champs-Élysées of Champagne' is an architectural gem dotted with châteaux from the Belle Époque period, and lined with champagne houses. They offer tasting sessions and tours of some of the 110 kilometres of underground chalk-cut cellars, storing 200 million bottles of bubbly under perfect conditions.

A year-round destination, Epernay is particularly festive in summer. At the end of June, the town and surrounding villages celebrate life in the region with the Champagne Festival (www.lachampagneenfete.fr). The packed three-day programme includes concerts, tastings, exhibitions and cellar tours.

Even newer than the Champagne Festival is the soaring journey visitors can now take into the skies above Epernay on a tethered hot air balloon, giving breathtaking views over the town and vineyards.

Or get up close and personal with the vines for yourself, by renting bicycles from Epernay's tourist office and following one of the many cycle paths that crisscross the region. A popular route is the 6-kilometre ride to Hautvillers, the original

home village of 17th-century monk Dom Perignon, reputed to have exclaimed that he was 'drinking stars' when he 'discovered' bubbles in his wine.

For visitors to Epernay later in the year, the second weekend of December sees the Avenue de Champagne transformed by the Habits de Lumière, or 'Dressed in Lights' festival (habitsdelumiere.epernay.fr/). Stroll down a bustling scene of champagne bars and street theatre, before admiring a spectacular fireworks display at the evening's end.

Top: welcome to Epernay (photo © CRTCA); cycling through Champagne vineyards (photo © CRTCA).

OTHER CHAMPAGNE EVENTS

The colourful Fêtes Johanniques in early June celebrates the heroic 15th century mission of a young Joan of Arc, to return the deposed dauphin to Reims and have him crowned Charles VII in 1429.

Visitors can enjoy a medieval-style market and the Great Royal Parade, re-enacting the procession to Reims Cathedral of Joan of Arc and the future Charles VII, accompanied by over 800 figures in historical costumes. See Reims Tourism for details (www.reims-tourisme.com).

The prestigious 48 Hour European vintage car rally (www.48heures.com/en) pulls onto the cobbled Renaissance-era streets of nearby Troyes from 7 – 9 September. A phenomenal spectacle, it sees 400 classic vehicles arrive from all over Europe for parades and drives through the Champagne countryside.





MASTERPIECE BY POMMERY*

CUVÉE LOUISE POMMERY
travail *in situ*, caves Pommery, Reims



PLEASE DRINK RESPONSIBLY

* Chef d'Œuvre de Pommery.



Above: old-world elegance at Domaine les Crayères (photo © horizonbleu). Right: chef Philippe Mille and team (photo © Aethion).

DOMAINE LES CRAYÈRES

Domaine Les Crayères (lescrayeres.com/en) is one of Champagne's most magnificent attractions for those seeking five-star elegance and a traditional fine dining experience.

The former home of the Polignac family, the chateau is located in the heart of Reims, within lush landscaped gardens spanning seven hectares. On arrival you will receive a warm welcome and impeccable levels of service. You can't fail to be enveloped by the atmosphere of old-world elegance and refinement that Les Crayères prides itself on offering its guests, whether they are here to attend a seminar in the meeting room, or spend the weekend in the lap of luxury.

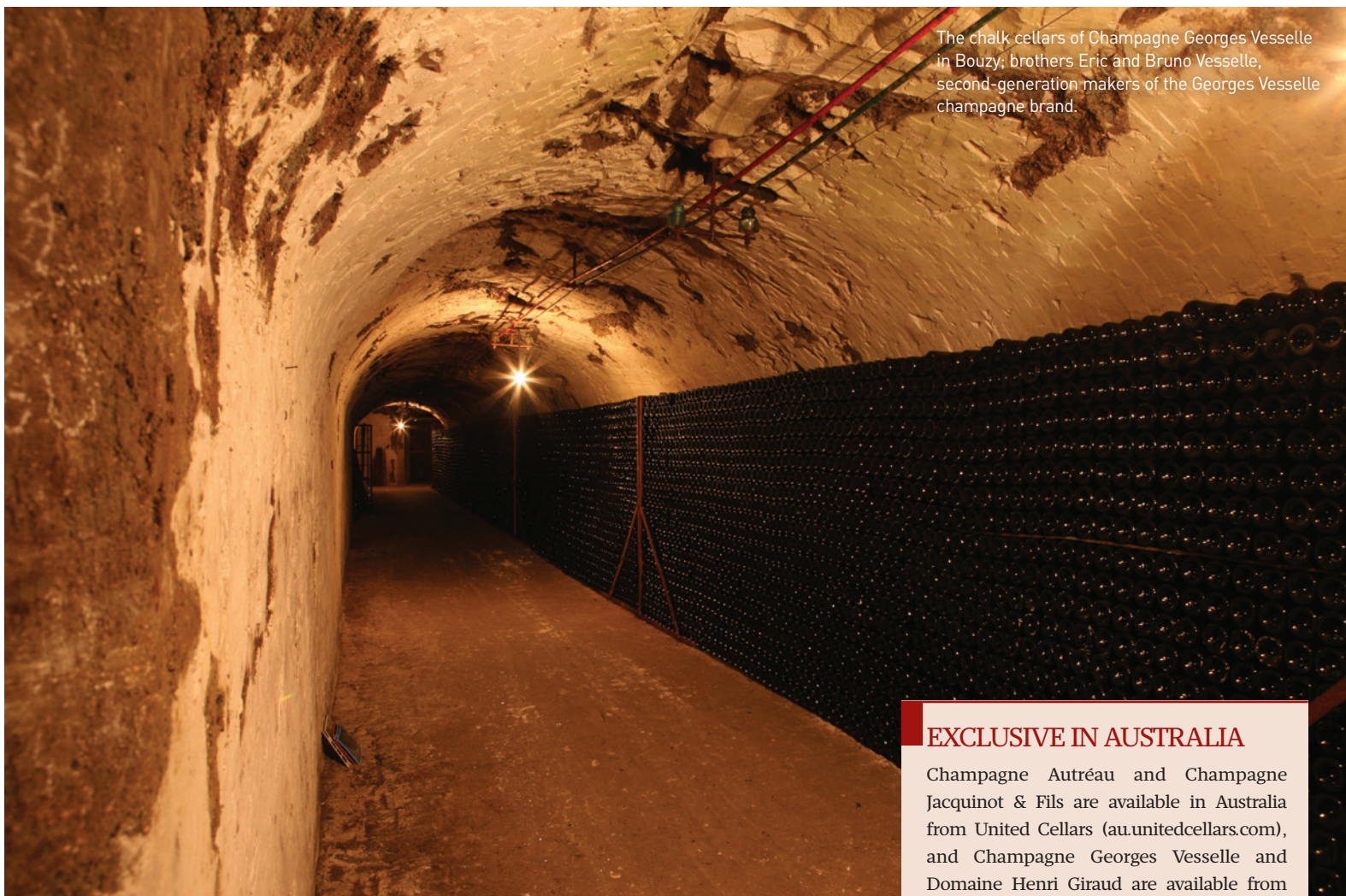
Voted one of the most charming hotels in Europe by *Travel + Leisure* magazine in 2014, Les Crayères offers 20 perfectly appointed rooms and suites. Each are filled with unique decorative flourishes, offering classic French style and all the amenities a modern traveller might expect.

With an extensive wine list (featuring more than 600 champagnes alone) and menus for all occasions, it's no surprise Les Crayères boasts



an award-winning combination of hospitality, cuisine and champagne. The head chef is Philippe Mille, honoured with two Michelin stars for his work at Le Parc, the gastronomic restaurant at Les Crayères, as well as the Meilleur Ouvrier de France, or 'Best Craftsman in France'.

The menu uses locally sourced produce whenever possible. Diners can choose from favourites that include Chalandray duck foie gras poached in Rosé Champagne, Roscoff lobster, and desserts such as pear with hibiscus wine and zesty orange meringue.



The chalk cellars of Champagne Georges Vesselle in Bouzy; brothers Eric and Bruno Vesselle, second-generation makers of the Georges Vesselle champagne brand.

EXCLUSIVE IN AUSTRALIA

Champagne Autréau and Champagne Jacquinot & Fils are available in Australia from United Cellars (au.unitedcellars.com), and Champagne Georges Vesselle and Domaine Henri Giraud are available from Wineorder (wineorder.com.au).

TASTING NOTES

Just five minutes' walk from Epernay's Avenue de Champagne, the Jacquinot & Fils estate (www.champagne-jacquinot.com) was founded in 1947, but traces its history back to the time of the French Revolution. Today the vineyards cover 17 hectares and the business is run by the founder's grandson, Jean-Manuel, who offers cellar visits in English for €20 including a tasting of two champagnes.

Just outside Epernay, the Henri Giraud Domaine (www.champagne-giraud.com) is located in the grand cru village of Ay, and is currently run by the 12th generation of the Hemart-Giraud family. With a motto of 'excellence', the domaine promises champagnes matured in locally sourced oak barrels, and zero pesticide residues.

On the hills above Champillon to the north of Epernay, the Autréau domaine (champagneautreau.com) has been producing champagnes since 1670. Today, seven different blends are produced from grand cru and first cru vineyards that carefully balance traditional and modern tastes. The cellars are open for tastings in English (by reservation), with prices starting from €14.50 for two premier cru tastings.

Created in 1951, Georges Vesselle



(www.champagne-vesselle.fr) is located in the village of Bouzy. The 17 hectares of vines are predominantly planted with Pinot Noir, and tasting sessions are offered free if followed by a purchase. Bruno Vesselle also runs a chambre d'hôtes, le Clos du Mont Rouge, whose four guest bedrooms have views over the vineyard www.closdumontrouge.fr. ■

Further Information

Champagne-Ardenne Tourism

www.champagne-ardenne-tourism.co.uk


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