



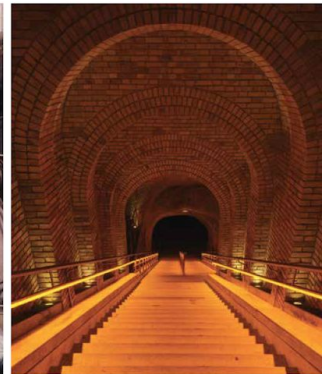
TINY BUBBLES, BIG CELEBRATIONS

How champagne earned its place
at the most festive of tables

BY CORRINA ALLEN KIERSONS

IN THE CITY OF REIMS, AN HOUR'S TRAIN ride east of Paris, the Roman-era Porte de Mars is the oldest standing monument, having survived the French Revolution, two World Wars, and the ravages of time and the elements. A 15-minute walk south of the gate is Notre-Dame de Reims. King Henry I married Anne of Kiev under its vaulted stone arches in 1051, and Joan of Arc liberated the cathedral from English invaders in 1429. Continue south past the Basilique Saint Remi, the burial place of Louis IV and you'll arrive at Veuve Clicquot's legendary crayères, 24 kilometres of chalk cellars, purchased by the champagne maker in 1909 but with passages dating back to the medieval period.

I had come to France to learn about the rich and storied history of champagne, and Reims proved itself to be the ideal spot for a lesson. It was early December and I had a landmark birthday celebration on the horizon so I diligently (read: reluctantly) left my warm, sumptuous bed at the Hôtel Christine in Paris' Saint-Germain-des-Près neighbourhood for a chilly, pre-dawn pilgrimage to Veuve Clicquot's UNESCO World heritage site cellars. The mission was to find the perfect bottle of bubbly to mark the approaching occasion – and to also discover how champagne has earned its reputation as that ubiquitous guest of honour at weddings, anniversaries and even royal coronations.



Left to right: Champagne vineyard, Madame Clicquot, Clicquot cellars



Veuve Clicquot maison

Turns out, Madame Clicquot was a shrewd entrepreneur. Through her social and business connections, the widow (*veuve*, in French) worked to ensure that the celebratory pop of her champagne corks was a frequent sound heard in royal houses across Europe, giving birth to the idea that Champagne was a drink reserved for VIPs. The reputation persists, but champagne inspires emotions that far exceed the high sticker price of a bottle or the fact that we see celebrities sipping from sparkling flutes at red carpet events. It's easy to sense how special it is even if you've never seen the place it comes from or how it's made – once you do, however, you realize that a bottle of Veuve Clicquot is, as Russian playwright Anton Chekhov once wrote, nothing less than a "treasure."

At the Clicquot cellars, I witnessed the effort, energy and care that goes into making each of the house's champagnes. From the grapes that are carefully selected from across the Champagne wine-growing region to the

pressing, fermenting, tasting and blending processes, attention to detail and process remain constant.

Because each bottle of champagne acts as a representative of the house it came from, an astounding 700 different wines are sampled by two dozen professional tasters to decide which ones will make it into a given blend. While Veuve Clicquot produces a range of champagnes each year, from Demi-Sec to La Grande Dame Rose, Madame Clicquot was fond of saying that the house offered only a single quality: the finest.

Widowed at the age of 27, Barbe-Nicole Clicquot quickly adapted to her new life as a 19th century magnate. Left in charge of enterprises ranging from banking to wool trading, she turned her attention completely to champagne, a pivot that would, in time, bring change and innovation to the entire industry. Credited not only with blending the world's first rose champagne, she also invented the *remuage* or riddling device that



hastens the clarification process by isolating and removing sediment from the champagne – one of Madame's original riddling tables remains in place 19 metres underground in Veuve's cellars in Reims. A modern version of that invention is still used today.

The cellars themselves are steeped in – and oftentimes physically marked by – this kind of history. I was moved to see how employees who spent their working years with the champagne house were honoured, with plaques carrying their names and dates of employment hung on walls throughout the crayeres. Evidence in the form of sketches, arrows and distinctive red crosses showed how the cellars offered protection to more than 1,000 French civilians and troops during the first World War when they converted into shelters, a hospital, a school and a chapel. In several of the larger cellars, frescoes by the sculptor André Navlet adorn the walls. One carving features the goddess of champagne, linking the chalk quarries back to their Roman roots. (Naturally, she favours Veuve Clicquot.)

History is rightfully celebrated at Veuve Clicquot, but how is that tied to the champagne's historical and continuing presence at our own celebrations? I had time to think about the connection over a bottle of Yellow Label brut in the tasting room at Reims. Even on a grey Thursday afternoon, there was something inherently festive about the glass of bubbles in front of me, something that made me feel lighter. The fizz goes to your head and its effervescence infects your spirit. Champagne has the power to lighten a heavy heart – it's both a key ingredient at any big celebration and a reason to celebrate in itself.

During the first World War, French fashion designer Paul Poiret found himself under enemy fire in Reims. Taking shelter in the rubble, he discovered a tunnel that led to the Clicquot cellars, where he was met with "forty good Frenchmen seated at a table among hams, bottles of

champagne and candlesticks." And in Gstaad, with the Germans on the brink of occupying Paris, Humphrey Bogart's Rick tells Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa, "Henri wants us to finish this, and then three more. He says he'll water his garden with champagne before he'll let the Germans drink any of it." Even at history's darkest hour, a bright spot of levity can be found in champagne.

On my final night in Paris, I was alone with a miniature bottle of Veuve Clicquot, no significant occasion to celebrate, and no dark moment that required the sparkle of champagne to dissolve. What I had was a cloudless evening, a room at the Sofitel Paris le Faubourg with a balcony view of the Champs-Élysées, and setting sun. So, like so many champagne drinkers before me, I raised a glass to its own contents and toasted Champagne itself. ☺

SAVOUR THE EXPERIENCE

Want to know how to mix the perfect champagne cocktail? While the French might frown on diluting one of their most famous exports with bitters and brandy, the Champagne Cocktail is a longstanding American classic, appearing in New York bartender Jerry Thomas' pioneering book on mixology first published in 1862. To make your bubbly go further (or to liven up a less than stellar bottle), take a single sugar cube – brown and white both work – and let it soak up a dash or two of Angostura bitters. Top with one ounce of good quality, chilled brandy and fill the rest of the glass with your champagne. Garnish the cocktail with a twist of citrus peel and serve in a coupe glass – because we're over flutes.

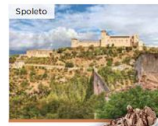


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