

Imbibing in Épernay, Home of Champagne

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You'll miss much of the region's charm if you don't meander along the Route Touristique du Champagne.

I took my first trip to Épernay, France with my mom and two girlfriends. Though I do not often visit the same place twice — given my extensive list of European cities to see — Épernay was so lovely and laid-back that I returned with my husband a few weeks later. Indeed, the Champagne region's quaint towns, fabulous food and surplus of bubbly are the ingredients that make for a peaceful weekend getaway again and again.

Champagne-Ardenne

It has been 2,000 years since the Romans introduced grape vines to the French region known today as Champagne-Ardenne. In the

late 1600s, a monk named Dom Pérignon is said to have improved the fermentation process for sparkling wines. By the early 20th century, legislation was passed to ensure that wines earning the distinction of Champagne are formulated with the region's grape varieties and follow strict cultivation and fermentation guidelines.

Épernay's Avenue de Champagne

Grand manufacturing buildings, ornate gates and art nouveau mansions bearing the emblems of famous brands and smaller names dominate the kilometer-long Avenue



de Champagne. Tourists wander from one business to the next to toast flutes of brut and compare the flavors of Épernay.

Visit the cellars of a renowned house to discover the history and processes involved in creating champagne, explore the caves where the work is done, and taste the rewards of patient labor. Mercier, Moët & Chandon and De Castellane are easily accessible destinations.

Mercier: Reservations are not necessary because the tour is done in large groups with personal, multilingual audio guides. The excursion was like a theme park ride, as an automated tram navigated the damp cellars 100 feet below ground. Afterward, we had three of Mercier's blends in the bright, ground-level atrium.

Moët & Chandon: Since my visit, the facility has been under renovation; however, tours should resume in late 2015. Moët is quite popular, so I recommend booking well in advance.

On foot, we discovered several sections of the 17-mile maze, looked at the coveted Dom Pérignon, peered at bottles in various fermentation stages, and asked lots of questions. Then we tried classics and vintages, and I eyed many glitzy gifts and bottles of bubbly in the shop.

De Castellane: The ornate 220-foot tower of Castellane is a great landmark to guide you while in Épernay. We skipped Castellane's cave expedition but viewed the exhibits chronicling champagne's history, trekked to the top of the tower, and compared Castellane's beverages to competitors'.



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continued on page 22



The Tower of Castellane is a great landmark to guide you while in Épernay.

Épernay's Other Producers: Most of the houses along the Avenue de Champagne are open during the day for tastings at set fees. Beyond the main strip, you may need an appointment.

Épernay's Gastronomy

Filling meals are needed after all that drinking. These restaurants are my favorites, boasting impressive champagne reserves and classical French fare.

Chez Max: Chez Max attracts locals and out-of-towners in search of exceptional cuisine. Owner Franck Besnard is welcoming and happy



Chez Max's seared sea scallops are served over a champagne cream sauce.

to translate if your French vocabulary consists of "Oui" and "Merci."

Offerings vary by season but may include sole in brown butter sauce, Châteaubriand, escargot, oysters on the half shell, terrine of foie gras, steak tartare and duck in red wine sauce. On both visits, I devoured the rich, buttery pan-fried foie gras in a champagne and fruit reduction, as well as the seared sea scallops served over champagne cream sauce. Yes, these items were so good that I could not be swayed to try something new the second time around.

La Cave à Champagne: Eat fairly priced French food and order from more than 100 champagnes, including 25 selections from Épernay. Three-course lunches and dinners start at under 20 euros per person with service and tax included. Individual dishes and gourmet set menus are also available.

I dined here on both trips because the dishes are delicious, particularly the *Escalope* of foie gras, the artichoke hearts and escargot with Chardonnay cream, and the steamed lobster on a bed of colorful mixed greens. But according to my taste buds, the clear winner was the gratinated oysters baked in champagne and butter — I ate everything on my plate except the shells. Review the dessert options before you order your first course because the portions are huge, and you may want to save room. I've never had a more generous ramekin of velvety *crème brûlée*.

C Comme: This bar and shop has more than 350 varieties of champagne in a huge cellar. Sample a champagne flight between bites of cured meats and *fromage*.

Be warned that there are so many choices at C Comme, and the flowing drinks may catch up with you. We chugged water while munching on tapas, and made reservations for a full dinner elsewhere.

At complimentary tastings, etiquette indicates that you should make a purchase.

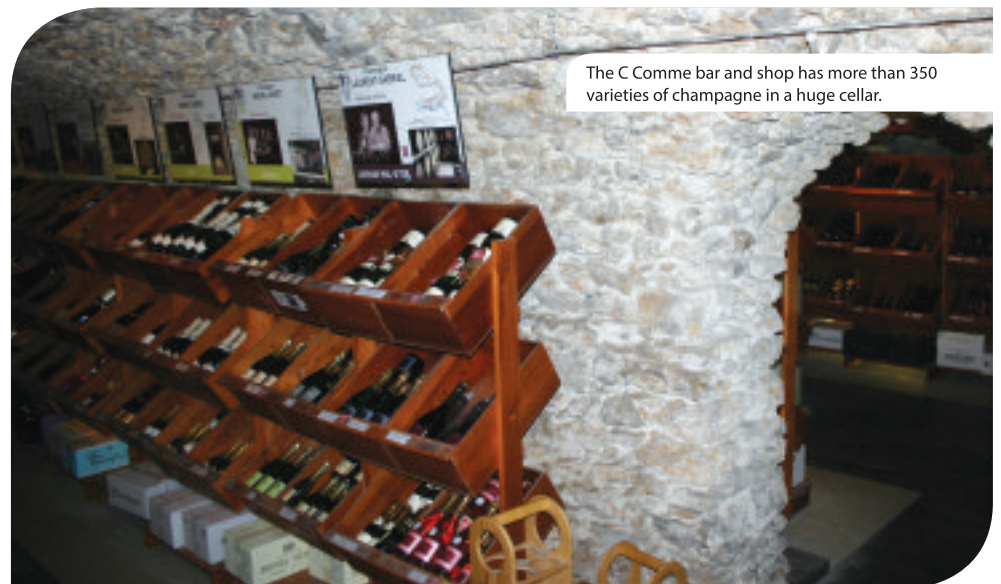
Beyond Épernay

You'll miss much of the region's charm if you don't meander through the villages along the Route Touristique du Champagne. The smaller producers of this area often provide free tastings in their homes or adjacent wineries. Each producer has a unique style, and usually lower prices than those in Épernay.

Follow road signs for the route, or download maps from www.champagne-ardenne-tourism.co.uk or www.champagnediscovery.com. The route is accessible by train and foot, bike, or car. Stop by each town's tourism office for brochures of local winemakers and look out for "Dégustation" (tasting) signs. Consider including Hautvillers, the final resting place of Dom Pérignon, and Reims in your itinerary.

We did not have a map, brochures or a plan. Instead, we drove around looking for signs and taking photos. We found several houses open on Saturday. Just when we thought our Sunday outing would be a wash, we saw the familiar words, "Pique Nique." I walked into a yard dotted with tables and chairs under large tents and asked in broken French if the winery was hosting an open event. Sure enough, it was a public picnic and wine tasting, and the locals welcomed us for an afternoon of eats, drinks and sunshine.

While in the land of the quintessential celebratory beverage, buy a bottle, a case or two (or ten!) to open for your next fête. ■



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