



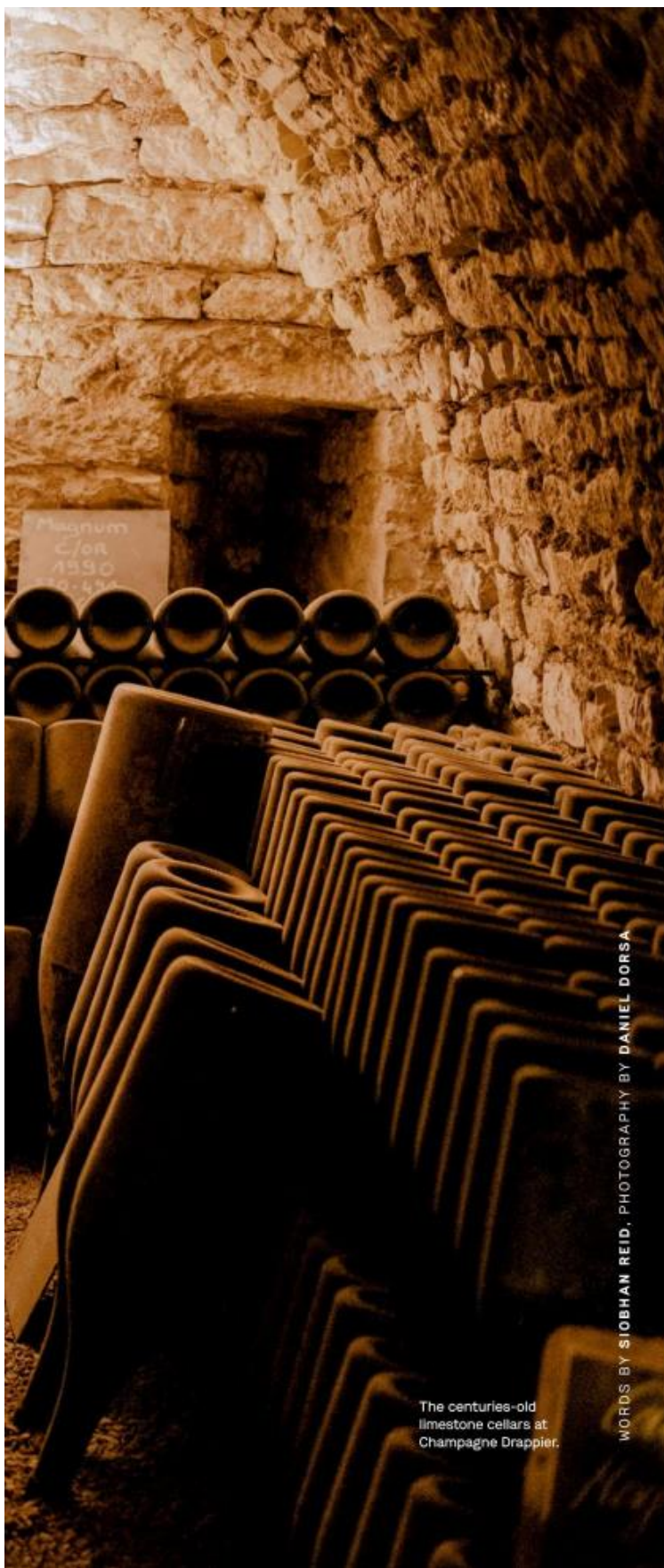
The Spirit of
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SPECIAL PRINT EDITION

Golden Bubbles





The centuries-old limestone cellars at Champagne Drappier.

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EXPERIENCE

A writer travels to **Champagne, France**, to **clink glasses** with leading producers and master the art of the **blend**.

I'M SITTING IN THE HANDSOME, wood-paneled tasting room at Champagne Drappier, in Urville, France, bracing myself for critical feedback. I've just blended my first Champagne and handed my glass to winemaker Hugo Drappier for his appraisal.

He sticks his nose in the bowl and inhales deeply. Then, bringing the glass to his lips, he swirls and swooshes the juice while staring fixedly at a point on the ground.

"Elegant," he says, looking up. "It's quite soft." Then, in a moment so surreal it takes me a beat to process, he brings the glass once again to his lips, takes a sip, and swallows — the ultimate compliment in the context of tasting.

I didn't come all the way to France to have my ego stroked by one of the world's top Champagne producers, but when you're an amateur in a room full of serious tasters, a little recognition goes a long way.

I'm traveling through the region with The Vines, a new membership club that hosts "blending escapes" to top wine regions. The trips combine activities and experiences that are off-limits to even the most well-connected connoisseurs, like private lunches with leading local winemakers, tastings of rare bottles, and blending exercises led by top producers. During these intimate sessions, members work with winemakers to create uniquely personal blends that are bottled and shipped to their private cellars at a later date.

While some members are just beginning their wine journeys, many are serious collectors who also own vineyards at The Vines of Mendoza, the private wine-making community in Argentina's Uco Valley. Since its founding in 2005, the development has ballooned to more than 250 members (mostly Americans) who return throughout the year to harvest and sort grapes and blend their wines. The Vines takes care of the less glamorous side of the job, from tending to the



EXPERIENCE

Enjoying a glass of rosé
Champagne, one of
40-plus wines tasted
during The Vines'
"blending escape."

• vines to dealing with shipping and handling, so owners can focus on the fun parts, like selecting grapes and designing labels.

“It’s an incredibly special place,” one of the members tells me on our first day. I’m inclined to believe him; like most members, he’s circled the globe in the name of wine. And now that The Vines has launched a traveling wine club, his world is only getting bigger.

Listening to him talk about his globe-trotting, I can’t help feeling like a bit of an imposter. I’ve never made wine, nor do I have a private cellar (unless my countertop wine fridge counts?). And while I’ve traveled to wine regions before, I’m not in the habit of socializing with vignerons on vacation.

But as becomes clear early on in our trip, in Champagne, traditions run deep and family dynasties still rule; unless you’re from the inside you’re effectively an outsider. And nobody, not least the winemakers, cares about how many bottles are in your cellar or what Michelin-starred restaurants you’ve visited.

“This isn’t Napa Valley or Bordeaux,” says head winemaker Michel Drappier, Hugo’s father, before our group descends the spiral staircase to the winemaking facilities and the historic cellars. He’s referring to the fact that industrial equipment like the bottling line is out there in the open — not hidden away in separate rooms as it might be in the more commercialized, visitor-facing wineries of Napa and Bordeaux. But the subtext seems to be: This is as authentic as it gets and anything else is Disneyland.

From a blending perspective, Champagne is in a league of its own. Since the majority of the wines are nonvintage, meaning they’re blended from grapes that are harvested over many growing seasons, tasters have to pull from a library of vintages to create well-balanced cuvées. This allows a house to maintain a consistent house style year after year, despite varying climatic conditions.

The process is made all the more rigorous by the fact that Champagnes are blended from still — not sparkling — base wines. Cellar masters have to anticipate how the juice will evolve throughout the *méthode traditionnelle*, whereby a wine undergoes a secondary fermentation in the bottle for

a period of at least 15 months before release. A longer aging process can, among other things, lead to the development of more creaminess and secondary aromas of biscuit and almonds, which can affect the overall texture and flavor of the wine.

And while some three dozen varieties are grown in Napa Valley, for example, in Champagne, only three grapes are king — pinot meunier, chardonnay, and pinot noir. These three varieties can yield extraordinary results, of course, but creating an assemblage is an exacting science as well as an art.

“You need to think of building a Champagne in terms of building blocks, as the foundation of a house or the base of a great dish,” says Marie Cecilie von Ahm, The Vines’ wine educator, during an orientation at our hotel, the five-star Domaine Les Crayères. “You’re trying to

build harmony in the glass that will develop into future harmony.” She explains that pinot meunier provides the fruit, chardonnay gives nerve and acidity, and pinot noir gives backbone, structure, and muscle.

The differences between regions is what makes The Vines’ traveling wine club concept so appealing, exposing members to new traditions and techniques and widening their cellars with bottles from all over the world.

But what ultimately sets the experience apart is the extraordinary level of access it offers to the world’s top winemakers. This, I discover, is what keeps these activities from ever feeling pretentious or contrived. Winemakers are farmers, after all, and most are incredibly passionate about what they do and happy to share.

On the second day of the trip, our group travels half an hour outside the capital city of Reims to Champagne Billet-Salmon. We pass quaint villages and stretched-out vistas with endless rows of vines before pulling onto a quiet lane in the town of Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, home to the family-owned estate and its prestigious Le Clos Saint-Hilaire vineyard.

After a glass of the 2006 vintage in the winery’s landscaped gardens and a tour of the cellars, we settle in for lunch in the family’s original home. A bottle of the •

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● Louis Salmon 2008 is popped as Antoine, the seventh-generation Billecart to lead the house, regales our group with stories of his family's history.

He tells us that his 99-year-old father, Jean Roland-Billecart, is one of the last people alive to have tasted wines from before World War II. "And he never misses a blending," Antoine says, explaining that the house's blending process can last up to three weeks and involves tasting more than 1,000 still wines.

"And this," he says, pointing to an oil painting of an austere-looking man with regal airs and a high-necked ruffled blouse, "is Louis Salmon" — the house's first-generation oenologist — "on the rare occasions he was dressed."

Our group erupts into laughter. Over the next two hours, a parade of wines is poured, including the Elisabeth Salmon Brut Rosé 2008, an elegant blush-hued sparkler with a chalky edge and notes of red fruit and citrus peel. At a certain point in the afternoon, even the more serious tasters in the room have lightened up and stopped taking tasting notes.

"The world of wine shouldn't be stiff," The Vines' founder, Michael Evans, later tells me over a glass of bubbly. "Wine is a beautiful, organic product. So, when we're seeking out partners to work with, the criteria is we need to love their wines and we also need to love hanging out with them."

For Evans, a former political campaign manager who worked on every presidential campaign between Clinton and Kerry, it's also important that the itineraries be, in a sense, democratic, shaped by members' feedback and incorporating a wide variety of activities beyond wine.

"We do a lot of surveys, formal and informal, which helps us plan scouting trips and expand into new areas," says Evans. "Our members are all travelers — they're curious and they share a deep passion for discovery."

Midway through our trip we tour the magnificent Reims Cathedral with a local archaeologist. She tells us that the church — a UNESCO World Heritage Site where 25 kings of France were crowned — was largely rebuilt after the devastation of World War I. We pause outside the doorway of the west facade, craning our necks to behold

the building's High Gothic grandeur, all intricate stone carvings, colorful stained-glass windows, and hundreds of biblical statues and sculptures.

After, we motor out to Atelier Simon-Marq, the oldest stained-glass studio in France (and possibly the world), dating to 1640. The atelier has created and restored stained-glass windows in churches across France, including the Chapelle Saint-Joseph in Reims, and collaborated with artists like Vincent Darré on one-of-a-kind works. We peer into the artists' workshops, watching them using ancient techniques like acid etching to transform large panels of colored glass into intricate pieces. Our guide is a specialist in the conservation of medieval glass who briefly worked as a conservator at New York's Metropolitan

Museum of Art before joining Atelier Simon-Marq. Listening to her explain the rigors of the craft gives me an entirely different appreciation for the kaleidoscopic panels we'd seen that morning at the cathedral.

Champagne, it turns out, has more to offer than just bubbly. On our second-to-last night, we get gussied up in our finest threads for dinner at the Michelin-starred Le Foch in Reims. In a private space just off the main dining room, I try the lean,

succulent meat of pigeon for the first time, and sample an array of exotic cheeses, including a creamy slab of the local Chaource variety. At one point in the evening, a bottle of notoriously rare Jacques Selosse Champagne is brought out, causing a fellow journalist to tear up from happiness. "I never thought I'd taste a Selosse in my lifetime," she says, trembling with excitement.

Tasting the golden juice, I have to agree: the wine is mind-blowingly good. But after a week traveling around the region, going from one family-run winery to the next, I longed to be back amid vines, with boots in chalky soils, a glass of Champagne in hand, and the likes of Hugo Drappier and Antoine Roland-Billecart as company. Anything else and I could be anywhere — Napa Valley or Bordeaux. And in that moment, my only wish was to pretend, if only for one last night, that I was an insider in the beautiful tradition-bound world of Champagne. ●

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A lunch with Antoine Roland-Billecart, head of the family-run Champagne house Billecart-Salmon, where above, a bottle's lees get a close-up during a tour. Above right: The region is dominated by rolling hills and vines, like those at Champagne Drappier in Urville, France.

