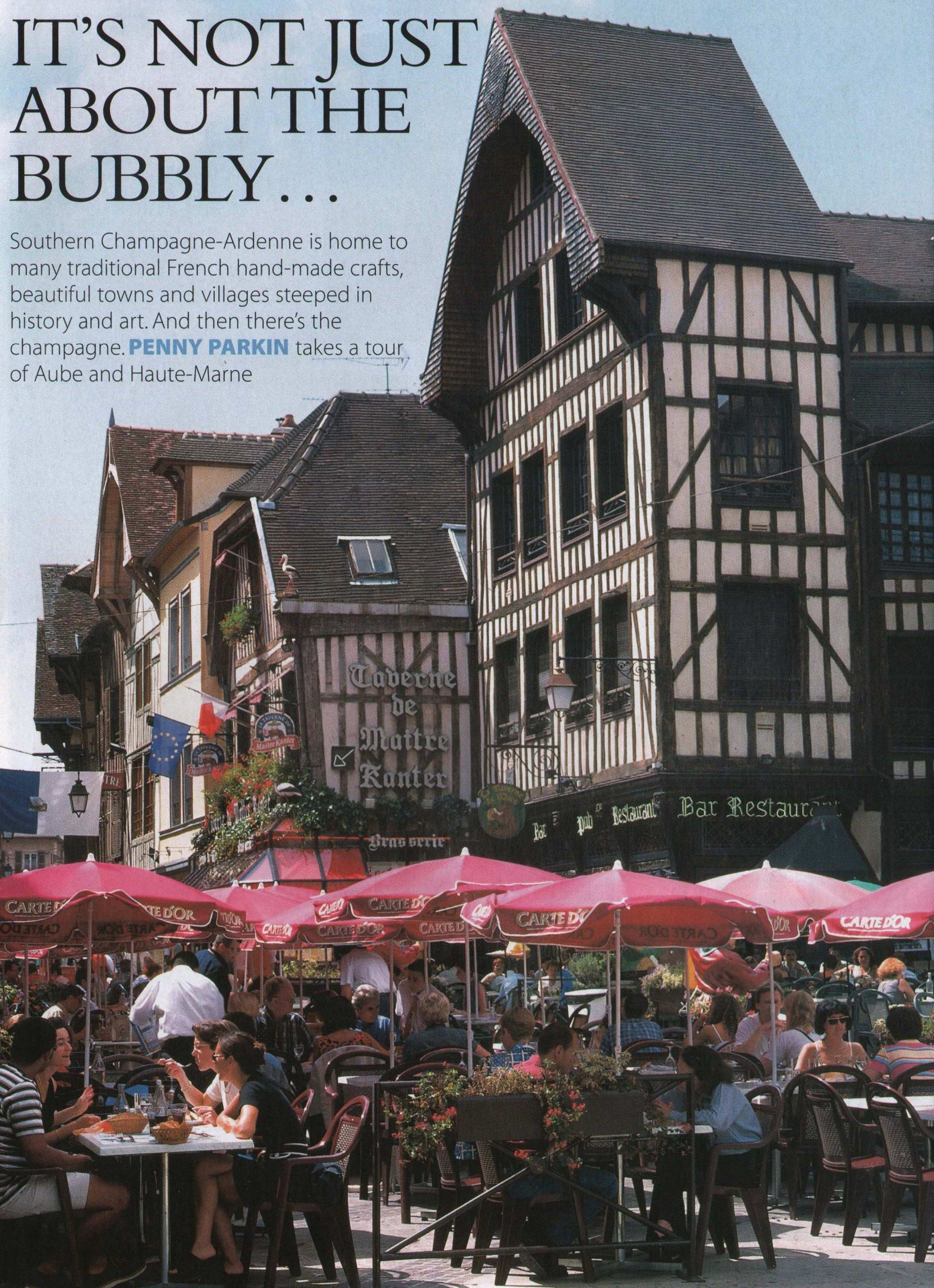


IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE BUBBLY...

Southern Champagne-Ardenne is home to many traditional French hand-made crafts, beautiful towns and villages steeped in history and art. And then there's the champagne. **PENNY PARKIN** takes a tour of Aube and Haute-Marne





AT THE SOUTHERN END OF Champagne-Ardenne, Aube and Haute-Marne form the 'lake district of champagne'. A stay in the two départements' principal towns of Troyes or Chaumont offers the opportunity to stock up on champagne whilst taking in the rural calm and surveying an array of artisan crafts.

Aube's central town of Troyes is a bustling, country town with narrow streets crammed with quirky half-timbered buildings. The former capital of Champagne, it makes an ideal first night stopover if travelling by train from Paris and has some excellent hotels and restaurants. Troyes (pictured left) also provides an excellent base from which to explore both Aube and Haute-Marne by car.

Taking the A5, the main arterial road that links Troyes and Chaumont, I headed straight for the Champagne Route of the Côte des Bar. The route handily links a number of independent champagne producers scattered between a series of picturesque villages. Ten can be counted between Celles-sur-Ource and Essoyes alone.

Loches-sur-Ource is the home of the family run Champagne Richardot, which overlooks the lush, sunny slopes of the Ource Valley. A tour of the Richardot cellars unravels several champagne producing mysteries. Madame Richardot is a congenial host and lets visitors into the secret of a perfect harvest: a sunny summer, which isn't too warm, and then rain for a few days before harvest to make the grapes bigger. She also reveals that Aube has a Burgundian climate, ideal for growing pinot noir grapes that make fruity champagne. Unfortunately 2003 hasn't been a good year. The summer was too hot and produced small, shrivelled crops.

Visitors are welcome to sample the champagne and to admire the breathtaking, panoramic views of the vineyards below the tasting room whilst toasting themselves before an inviting log fire. I tasted the impressive Champagne Brut Tradition Richardot, which tastes of summer fruits but mustn't be drunk with chocolate, and the more rounded Cuvée Prestige. Renowned for its production of high quality grapes, Champagne Richardot also produces grapes for 60 clients including Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin.

The early Troyes champagne fairs, introduced in the 10th century, soon led to a demand for crystalware and effectively created another champagne-related industry in Aube. The village of Bayel is situated at the crossroads of the D396 and

the D47 and houses champagne's last crystal manufacturer. Set up in 1666 by a Murano glassmaster called Mazzolay, it became a natural royal court supplier to Louis XIV.

A guided tour of the factory by my guide Jean-Claude Duvivier reflects this proud history and reveals a close-knit factory operation with 160 employees. The skilled craftsmen I meet display a fierce pride and camaraderie with which they go about their work. Having worked at the factory for the last 20 years, their craftsmanship is old fashioned but mesmerising to watch.

Remarkably all Bayel crystalware is still hand blown. Stems and bases are added separately to each glass and each finished item is uniformly cooled to 30 degrees in an annealing tunnel. After quality checking for thickness and flaws, rims are precisely cut, sand blasted and heated to produce a curved lip, then cooled and packaged for distribution to either the Bayel factory shop, the larger Paris stores or directly to clients.

CHAMPAGNE FAIRS
INTRODUCED IN
THE 10TH CENTURY
SOON LED TO A
DEMAND FOR
CRYSTALWARE



GLASS BLOWER: Cristalleries de Bayel

BEST FOOT FORWARD:
Making the most of the
champagne festival in
Les Riceys



The old mill wheel,
La Fleuristerie



Today the crystal works produces champagne glasses for Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin, perfumiers such as Hermès, and luxury goods users such as Orient Express. In an attempt to keep up with current trends, the factory also experiments with new techniques. Dents can be made and frosted into the glasses, and gold and platinum can be used to coat the rims. An ingenious array of new products such as coloured flower and wave-adorned vases are also in progress.

General de Gaulle (1890–1970) was a fan of Bayel crystal and ordered it for state functions held at his home La Boisserie in the nearby town of Colombey-les-deux-Églises. Bought in 1933, La Boisserie was badly damaged and abandoned during World War II. After its restoration, De Gaulle returned at weekends to write his memoirs. He died at La Boisserie on 9 November 1970 from a heart attack at the patient table close to his magnificent study, which commands stunning views of the surrounding countryside. The house is now a museum with memorabilia from his life.

President of France from 1958 to 1969, De Gaulle now lies in a simple tomb in the peaceful Colombey village churchyard and is buried with his beloved daughter Anne whose health dictated that the family settle in Colombey rather than Paris. A number of permanent tributes have been laid close by and a sentry ensures that the General rests in peace, the message 'silence' mounted on the wall as one enters. A more striking, though undoubtedly less personal monument to De Gaulle, is the giant pink

Granite cross of Lorraine



Horn blowers from the region



Cour du Lion Noir, Troyes



The old quarter, Troyes



Impossibly narrow streets, Troyes



RENOIR

Charming, peaceful, and rural, Essoyes is also famous for the workshop and home of Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919). The town was the birthplace of Aline Charigot, Renoir's model and companion. The couple married in 1890 and bought a home here in 1895, which comprised a family residence containing a small workshop. The new workshop was commissioned in 1905.

Aline appears in several of Renoir's paintings including featuring as the young girl in a straw hat in *The Luncheon of the Boating Party*, painted in 1881. Apparently she knew little of Paris sophistication and so entertained Renoir's famous friends, including Monet, with her country cooking. The couple's son Claude appears as a clown in his painting of the same name, which was completed in Essoyes in 1909.

An aura of calm and stillness surrounds the house whilst the workshop, built in 1905, commands fantastic views of the surrounding countryside which is mainly farmland. Back outside, a gaggle of geese leads us on a frosty but sunny morning to a peaceful country cemetery where both Renoir and his wife are buried. The graves are easily recognisable—both have memorial busts made by Renoir's apprentice Guino.

Renoir's workshop is currently open to the public but the family home remains a private property. The owner, Renoir's great-great-granddaughter Sophie, recently spoke at the Courtauld Institute in London and gave a vivid portrayal of her happy childhood in Essoyes. She also admits to frequent visits to the Musée d'Orsay to see her favourite Renoir paintings.

Today, visitors can retrace Renoir's footsteps and take a walk along one of the many Renoir-related walks in Essoyes. They can even eat the same meals he used to enjoy at l'Hôtel des Canotiers, set to open on 12 March 2004. The hotel restaurant will serve recipes belonging to Renoir's mother that Pierre-Auguste shared with Matisse and Maillol in Essoyes.

RENOIR: a fitting memorial to the great artist



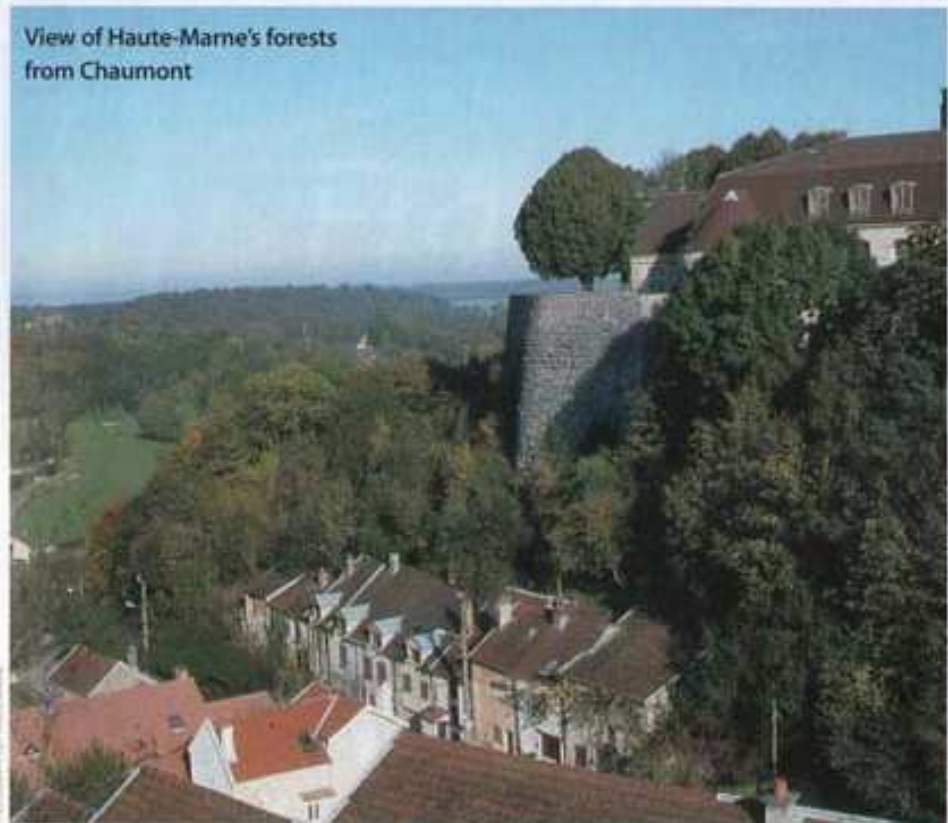
granite cross of Lorraine that dominates the Colombey skyline. Erected in 1972, it personifies De Gaulle's notion of *la gloire* and took five months to build from when the foundation block was first laid.

Due south of Colombey, another thriving cottage industry peculiar to southern Champagne-Ardenne is to be found in the rural village of Orges in the Haute-Marne département. The Moulin de la Fleuristerie is the only remaining floral design centre in France and thrives in the river valley that powers its impressive water wheel. Having remained an exclusive secret for over a century, La Fleuristerie only recently opened to the public.

A tour of the mill explains how an impressive total of 2,300 different flowers are made and offers a history of its early incarnation as a working flour mill. The old mill wheel is still used today to power an electric turbine to provide the necessary 110 volts to light its workshop. Inside, three hardy local women brave the cold to operate original machinery dating back to 1903, including looms that work in gross. Particularly intriguing is a wooden apparatus for cutting flower stems, which are then dipped in couscous and dyed with food colouring to produce lavender flowers.

Owing to its monopoly as the only operation of its kind in France, the mill

View of Haute-Marne's forests
from Chaumont



naturally produces flower parts for haute-couture houses. Chanel's Spring/Summer 2001 collection included an embroidered camellia dress made with pink buds from La Fleuristerie. It also supplies flowers for millinery, the confectionery industry and for interior design and wedding accessories.

For those interested in artisan crafts, southern Champagne-Ardenne is difficult

to beat. In addition to champagne, crystalware and haute-couture flowers, the region also boasts basket weaving in Fayl-Billot, cutlery making in Nogent and wrought ironwork in the villages of Dommartin-le-Franc, Sommevoire and Wassy. Whether you take the Paris train to Troyes or Chaumont, you won't be disappointed. ▷

CHAUMONT

Chaumont is the principal town of Haute-Marne and doubles as the administrative capital of Champagne, a title it stole from the quaint nearby fortified town of Langres. Built on a rocky limestone spur, it was the former residence of the Counts of Champagne during the 13th century.

A guided tour of the old town reveals many picturesque private mansions from the 15th and 16th centuries. Perched over the grey cobbled streets of the rue Monseigneur-Desprez, they sport elaborate doors and tiny elevated roof windows. Quirky corbelled turrets were also cunningly employed to house spiral staircases in order to minimise building tax.

The rue du Palais leads to the keep of the comtes de Champagne, which is all that now remains of the old château. Towering 45 metres above the Suize Valley, it commands a spectacular view of Haute-Marne's forests, rivers and verdant countryside. An impressive viaduct designed by the civil engineer Decomble runs across the Suize Valley beyond the town and can be traversed by walkers.

Back in the heart of the old town, the basilica of Saint John the Baptist is another striking piece of architecture and demonstrates both early and late Gothic styles. It also houses many interesting stained-glass windows, pews and Bouchardon woodcarvings, including the high altar and the pulpit.



ESSOYES: birthplace of
Aline Charigot, Renoir's
model and companion

RESTAURANTS

AUBERGE DE LA MONTAGNE (1 MICHELIN STAR)

Arlette and Gérard Natali run this classically decorated Michelin-starred restaurant with beautifully laid tables and attentive staff. Paintings of country scenes and the low-key buzz of regional chatter lend an atmosphere of sedate elegance. A fabulous 10-course meal includes such delights as a mushroom soup with mussels, salmon spring rolls with sweet and sour oysters, and a melt-in-the-mouth *crème brûlée*.

17 rue de la Montagne
52330 Colombey-les-deux-Églises
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 01 51 69

TERMINUS REINE

The highlight of the Terminus Reine, handily situated by Chaumont station, is its excellent restaurant. After truffle hunting with François Jehle's charismatic chef, you can cook the truffles you find and then tuck into a three-course truffle extravaganza. Courses include salmon in a delicious butter sauce with grated white truffles, venison with tagliatelle and truffles and ice cream with a grated black truffle sauce.

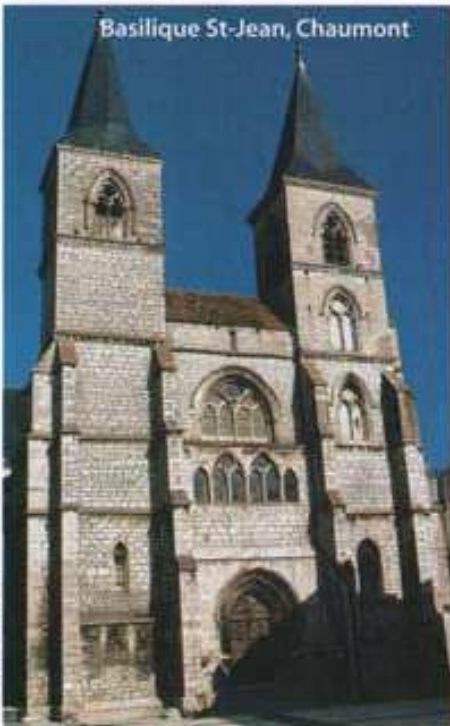
Place du Général-de-Gaulle
52000 Chaumont
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 03 66 66

HÔTEL LES REMPARTS

Owners Dominique and Gérard Guy offer good food and friendly, helpful service. I can recommend the *kir royal* accompanied by some ingenious *amuse-bouches*, in particular the sardine pâté and toast. As a main course, the duck in red-wine sauce with cold pear was excellent.

72 rue de Verdun
52000 Chaumont
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 32 64 40

Basilique St-Jean, Chaumont



Old quarter, Chaumont



Champagne festival,
Les Riceys



Floral design

FRANCOFILE

HOW TO GET THERE

By train: Eurostar from London Waterloo to Paris Gare du Nord, then TGV from Paris Est to Troyes (90 minutes). Book with Rail Europe, tel: 08705 848 848, www.raileurope.co.uk

By car: Dover-Calais ferry crossing or Eurotunnel, then A26 to Troyes. P&O Ferries, tel: 08705 20 20 20; Eurotunnel, tel: 08705 35 35 35, www.eurotunnel.com

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to October

WHERE TO STAY

Royal Hôtel
22 bd Carnot
10000 Troyes
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 73 19 99

Hostellerie de la Chaumière
81 Route Nationale 19
10200 Arsonval
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 27 91 02

Au Rendez-Vous des Amis
4 place du Tilleul
52000 Chamarandes
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 32 20 20

Hôtel Les Remparts
72 rue de Verdun
52000 Chaumont
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 32 64 40

CONTACTS

Comité Départemental du Tourisme de l'Aube
34 quai Dampierre
10000 Troyes
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 42 50 00;
www.aube-champagne.com

Comité Départemental du Tourisme et du Thermalisme de la Haute-Marne
40 bis, av Foch
52000 Chaumont
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 30 39 00;
www.tourisme-hautemarne.com

Champagne Richardot
38 rue René-Quinton
10110 Loches-sur-Ource
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 29 71 20
Open every day by appointment except Sundays

Office de Tourisme, Bayel
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 92 42 68

Renoir's Workshop, Essoyes
Open 15 May-1 Nov, 2pm-6.30pm
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 38 56 28

Le Moulin de la Fleuristerie
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 01 14 72

La Boiserie, Colombey-les-deux-Églises
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 01 52 52
Open Feb-Nov, Wed-Mon by private appointment