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A Hidden CHAMPAGNE & Art Trail in Reims

From Ruinart's new sculpture garden and secret cellar to Pommery's musical journey thirty metres below ground, the French capital of sparkling wine is unveiling lavish effervescent escapes, discovers **Maïa Morgensztern**.

Who hasn't heard of champagne? While many people opt for bottles of Perrier-Jouët, Ruinart, Pommery and other renowned brands of bubbly to preside over celebratory feasts, few know that these *maisons* have decided to bring the fun home, combining the region's storied history with captivating modern art installations. Now is the perfect time to visit the French region's best cellars and discover a few cultural gems along the way.

The journey of champagne as we know it started in 1728 after King Louis XV signed a treaty allowing his favourite "grey wine with bubbles" from the Champagne region to be shipped in bottles rather than large wooden barrels. After more than a decade of scientific feuding with Burgundy wine supporters, the King hoped his beverage of choice would thrive, spilling crates of joy into the glitterati's homes like there was no tomorrow. The following year, in Reims, Nicolas Ruinart drafted the founding charter of the world's first champagne house. Taittinger followed suit in 1734, and Moët & Chandon in 1743.



Today, Reims is a vibrant city accessible by train from Paris in under an hour. Picking up a bicycle or a car from there is quite easy, and you'll soon be passing Art Deco buildings, the Beaux-Arts Museum and the Place Royale, named after Louis XV. Before settling down for a well-earned glass of bubbles, be sure to visit the majestic cathedral Notre-Dame de Reims, where nearly all French kings have been crowned since the 11th century. Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the current church dates back to the 13th century and is one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture. On the north portal of the facade, the soft grin of the "smiling angel" is a symbol of humanistic realism in medieval statuary. If you have a chance, take a peek inside to see the modern stained-glass windows designed by Marc Chagall.



clockwise from left:
 With Champagne comes fine dining; caves for aging; Domaine Pommery; grapes on the vine



If you're into glasswork, a detour to see Atelier Simon-Marq is a must. The workshop not only produced Chagall's Biblical tales for the nearby cathedral, but it also made windows for the churches of Fraumünster in Zurich and Tudeley in England. Created in 1640, the Atelier is now located in the church of Sacré-Coeur, home to a large glass composition by Charles Marq. Near the former crypt, a couple of highly skilled artisans toil with a mish-mash of colourful sheets of glass and metallic wires as they restore Renaissance-era panels. In the adjacent lab, technicians in protective goggles painstakingly spread pigments with a fine brush to bring Jean-Paul Agosti's kaleidoscopic vision to life.

Recently, the Atelier and artist Claire Tabouret won the much-debated competition to create Notre-Dame de Paris' new set of stained-glass works. Before the world gets to snap them in the French capital, this is where they will be made.

clockwise from left:
Behind the scenes at Taittinger; art in all its forms abounds in Reims; Notre Dame de Reims

Back in town, Maison Pommery's exuberant castle features a lawn filled with whimsical sculptures blown out of proportions. However, the real deal is hidden inside the mansion, through a set of heavy doors and down a never-ending flight of stairs. Thirty meters into the deep, the *Crayères* or chalk caves, are spread over 18 metres and feature galleries and tunnels kept in semi-darkness. With its perfect balance of humidity and constant temperature year-round, the gigantic maze has been sheltering the house's precious ageing wine since Madame Pommery took charge of the land at the end of the 1860s.

For the last twenty years, the former chalk quarry, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a visual feat in itself, has also been home to some jaw-dropping artistic displays. Titled *Experience*, the



art journeys lead visitors past a dozen monumental sculptures, set up alongside thousands of dusty bottles piled up like a true pirate's bounty. Over 300 emerging and celebrated creatives from all over the world have already participated in the project. Unveiled earlier this year, *Experience #18: Underground Melodies* features works by artists Pablo Reinoso, Choi Jeong Hwa, Nam Tchun-Mo, musician Yoshiki and fashion icon Felipe Oliveira Baptista.

Once you have fully soaked in art and music, make sure you leave enough time for a glass of Grand Cru Royal

from bottom left:
 Reims is one of France's most historic destinations; Basilica Sainte-Clotilde, Reims; champagne was championed by King Louis XV; Villa Demoiselle



2009 and other vintages in the bar upstairs, sitting near Daniel Firman's circus elephant standing on its trunk.

Next door, Maison Ruinart's dramatic passageway leads straight into a sculpture garden, which was inaugurated last Fall. A winding path dotted with artworks by Eva Jospin, Pascale Marthine Tayou and Cornelia Konrads reminds visitors of the delicate relationship between mankind and nature. To the left, Marcus Coates' daily flag, dedicated to the local fauna and flora, signals the entrance to the brand new Nicolas Ruinart Pavilion, designed by Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto. Built as a homage to the surrounding landscape, the see-through building offers a selection of snacks and a wide range of in-house blends. Serious collectors and those in the mood for a rare Blanc de Blancs cuvée can be discreetly ushered into the secret cellar located underneath the bar, which is accessible through a spiral staircase seemingly leading nowhere.

Breathe in, breathe out - and drink some water - before heading to Épernay. The small



road with its dedicated bike lane passes by hilly vineyards, bucolic villages and the regional park La Montagne de Reims. It is then up to you: make a short stop by the Abbaye d'Hautvillers, where monk Dom Perignon came up with his famous champagne, or head straight to the centre of town and Maison Belle Époque, home of Perrier-Jouët.

Set in a late 18th-century mansion, the brainchild of Pierre-Nicolas Perrier and Rose-Adélaïde Jouët is home to Europe's biggest private collection of Art Nouveau. A visit to the property unveils works by Hector Guimard, a fern salon by Louis Majorelle and portraits by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Auguste Rodin. The Maison also regularly collaborates with contemporary artists like Tord Boontje, Mischer Traxler, Luftwerk and Bethan Laura Wood to bring a fresh look to the historic setting.

In the vineyard, renowned artistic duo FormaFantasma recently inaugurated *Cohabitare*, a series of totemic installations designed to nurture and highlight the local biodiversity. The journey ends with a gastronomic experience in the restaurant, with a menu designed to complement the house's best vintages. ■

