



Champagne: vines, cellars and cuvées

Reims, Épernay, Côte des Blancs

7–11 September 2021 (MH 882)

5 days • £2,280

Lecturer: Giles MacDonogh

Private tastings and meals at both international and family-owned champagne houses including Ruinart and Charles Heidsieck.

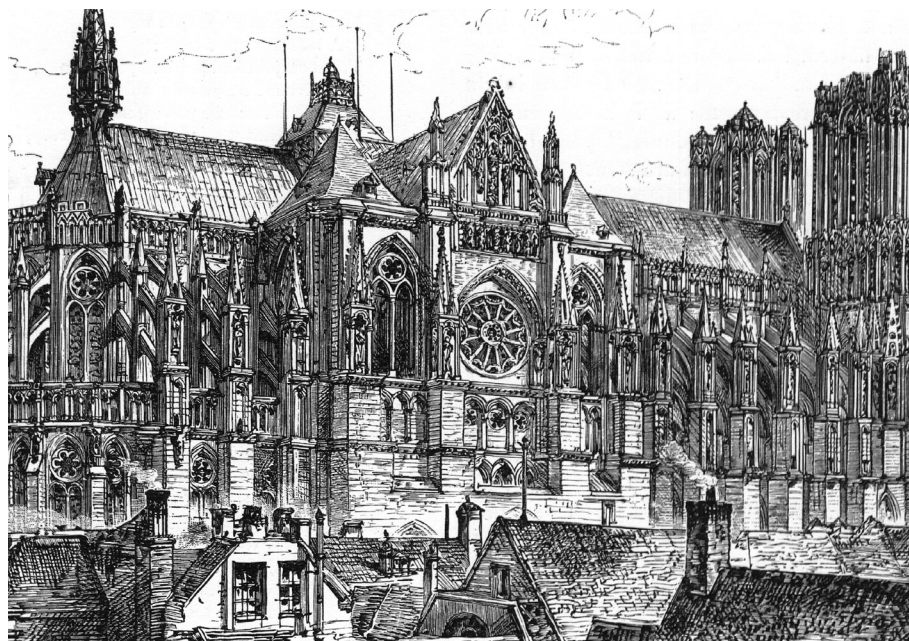
Stay in the heart of historic Reims and travel to Épernay as well as classified villages in the Montagne de Reims and the Côte des Blancs.

Become immersed in the history of champagne and its significance for the region and the world.

Champagne is the wine of kings and oligarchs, demand way outstrips production and prices are merciless; but it wasn't always so. Planted by the Romans, like so many other parts of France, the Champagne region produced weedy wines before the 17th century as the area was too far north to guarantee ripe grapes. Only in very hot summers would the Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay grapes of the Montagne, Marne and the Côte des Blancs achieve levels of colour and alcohol that would have rendered champagne comparable to the great wines of Burgundy, where the cocktail of grape varieties was largely the same.

Although champagne was the wine of coronations in Reims, it was not until the 17th century that it found an international vocation. Pierre Pérignon, a monk at the Abbey of Hautvillers in the Marne Valley, and English merchants doctoring shipments of new wines struck on a way of giving the wine a fresh twist. Laced with sugar and run into strong bottles before the spring, champagne underwent a second fermentation which not only resulted in more acceptable alcohol levels but induced sparkling as well.

Sparkling champagne was an instant success. It was the fizz of Charles II's court and the louche days of the French Regency following the death of Louis XIV. While still champagne continued to be made, the sparkling stuff was always in demand when people were in the mood for fun. It had become the favourite of poets and painters, even before the widows and German book-keepers of the 19th century resolved the final technical problems and transformed champagne into one of the world's greatest wines.



Reims Cathedral, engraving from 'The Magazine of Art', 1890.

Itinerary

Day 1: London to Reims. Leave London St Pancras by Eurostar at c. 10.30am for Paris, and continue by coach to the heart of the attractive, historic city of Reims. Arriving at c. 4.00pm, there is time to settle into the hotel before an introductory talk and our first tutored champagne tasting. Dinner at a nearby restaurant with a regional menu and carefully-selected wines to accompany the meal. All four nights are spent in Reims.

Day 2: Épernay. By coach through the picturesque landscape of the Montagne de Reims to the small, but important town and trading centre of champagne - Épernay. Lecture and tasting at the trade body, Comité Champagne to illustrate champagne trends, followed by lunch at a bustling, central restaurant. Afternoon private visit of the old cellars at Moët et Chandon, culminating in a tasting of its prestigious vintage champagne, Dom Pérignon. Take a scenic route by local train to return to Reims.

Day 3: Côte des Blancs, Montagne de Reims. South through a sweeping, panoramic monoculture of vines to the Côte des Blancs premier-cru village of Vertus. Charming, personal visit of the cellar and its surrounding vines at the highly-regarded, family-owned

Fourny & Fils. Lunch in a good, typical local restaurant. By contrast, back north in the afternoon to the premier-cru village of Mailly and its respected cooperative with commanding views over the predominantly Pinot Noir vines of the Montagne de Reims. Visit and tasting of four distinct champagnes.

Day 4: Reims. The glamorous house of Ruinart and its chalk cellars, or crayères, carved out by the Romans, form a part of an extraordinary network of passages and caverns beneath the entire city, their natural subterranean qualities ideal for wine storage. Independent lunch and free afternoon to explore the rich and strategic history of Reims: its cathedral; early 20th-century architecture; markets. Maison Charles Heidsieck offers a beautiful setting for our final early-evening visit, followed by a tasting and seasonal dinner partnered by perfectly-matched champagnes.

Day 5. A leisurely start. Leave Reims at c. 10.30am by coach for Paris and continue by Eurostar to London St Pancras, arriving at c. 3.30pm.

The tour is dependent on the kindness of many individuals and organisations, some of whom are reluctant to make arrangements far in advance, so the order of visits outlined above may change and there may be substitutions for some of the wineries mentioned.

Champagne: vines, cellars and cuvées
continued

Lecturer

Giles MacDonogh. Critically acclaimed historian and author, food and wine expert, translator of French and German, teacher and journalist. For many years he was a professional wine judge, and Chairman of the Juries for Germany and Austria at the World Wine Awards. He has written four books and numerous articles on wine.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,280 or £2,140 without Eurostar. **Single occupancy:** £2,460 or £2,320 without Eurostar.

Included: train travel by Eurostar (Standard Premier); coach travel; hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 2 lunches and 2 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hôtel de la Paix, Reims (bestwestern-lapaix-reims.com): comfortable, modern and central 4-star hotel, originally three separate buildings. Rooms are bright and well-equipped.

How strenuous? There is quite a lot of walking and standing in possibly muddy vineyards and cool, damp cellars (stairs to the crayères can be steep and numerous) as well as tasting an average of 5 champagnes per day. The first and last days involve a long drive but there is little coach travel in between. Average distance by coach per day: 57 miles.

Group size: between 10 to 22 participants.

Combine this tour with: *Dutch Modern*, 2–6 September 2021 or *Courts of Northern Italy*, 12–19 September 2021.