

A close-up photograph of several hands holding champagne flutes, clinking them together in a toast. The glasses are filled with a golden, bubbly liquid. In the background, the faces of people are visible, some smiling and laughing, creating a festive and joyful atmosphere. The lighting is warm and soft, highlighting the bubbles in the champagne and the textures of the hands and glass.

Champagne

the drink of friendship

Holiday festivities sparkle with French Champagne, but there's no reason the bubbly can't be served all year.

Champagne is a quintessential drink at holiday celebrations and special occasions. However, I can't remember any event more magical than my first sip of champagne in Reims, the capital of France's Champagne region. All that talk about *terroir* making the difference in the way a wine tastes is especially apparent when drinking champagne in the place where it's produced. I thought I knew all about the sparkling beverage, but I really didn't understand it until I visited two very different champagne houses in the region.



Many wine tourists in France make stops at large, well-known champagne houses like Veuve Clicquot, Taittinger, or Pommery. Visiting *Champagne Pommery's* cavernous cellars and Disney-esque tasting room was indeed memorable. My champagne education, however, began at a small family-owned producer in the village of Verzy, about twelve miles from Reims.

Champagne Etienne Lefèvre is located in the Montagne de Reims sub-region of Champagne where all the vineyards are classified as Grand Cru, the top rating for champagnes. The owners' ancestors

worked in the vineyards for centuries, and Madame Anne-Marie Lefèvre's grandfather

acquired the chalk cellars that the family still uses to house the 85,000 bottles a year it produces.

A petite woman, Anne-Marie's effervescent personality matches the champagne that she and her husband, Etienne, make. After a warm welcome, she guides a small group of us into the naturally excavated limestone caves where bottles are aged and stored. She demonstrates how bottles of an exquisite 2004 vintage are still turned by hand in an antique riddling rack — a process that is critical in making good champagne. She stops at a nook enclosed by wrought iron gates where a 1985 vintage is stored. "A good year," she says, and then with a wink adds, "because it was the year my daughter was born."

When someone in the group asks how long a bottle of champagne could be stored at home, she replies in English, "Don't conserve it, drink it."

The French do not save champagne for just special occasions; rather a glass is served at the beginning of almost every meal as the perfect accompaniment to appetizers. It's also a drink of hospitality in the only region in the world where sparkling wines can be called champagne.

Back in the *Champagne Etienne Lefèvre* tasting room, several bottles of champagne are opened for a tasting because the Lefèvres want us to find "the right wine for our palates."



Each label is distinctive, ranging from semi-sweet to very dry. Lefèvre uses only Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes in his champagnes, which range from 50/50 blends all the way to 100 percent Pinot Noir. Verzy, the slope where the Lefèvres live and work, is considered 'the kingdom of Pinot Noir.'

"The *terroir* here is magic," Anne-Marie says.

The limestone and chalky soil produces some of the best Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes in the world, both of which are used to make champagnes. As early as the 4th century, Romans cultivated the vineyards, located in northeastern France, and champagne houses sprang up in the early 18th century.

Anne-Marie is a fountain of information and supplies details that tourists don't always hear on a wine-tasting tour, especially one that costs only five Euros. For example, she tells us a scientist at a local university estimated that a bottle of champagne contains 45 to 50 million bubbles. She demonstrates how to properly open a bottle of champagne by leaving the metal wire intact. She shows us an old vine that was grafted with American rootstock to battle *Phylloxera*, a blight that almost wiped out France's vineyards in the late 1800s.

"Phylloxera initially came from America, but help also came from the Americans," she says with a smile.

Champagne is often associated with luxury, rites of passage, and celebrations. Anne-Marie adds another important reason to serve it: "Most of all, champagne is friendship."

For more information about the Champagne region, visit www.champagne-etienne-lefevre.com or www.reims-tourisme.com.

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