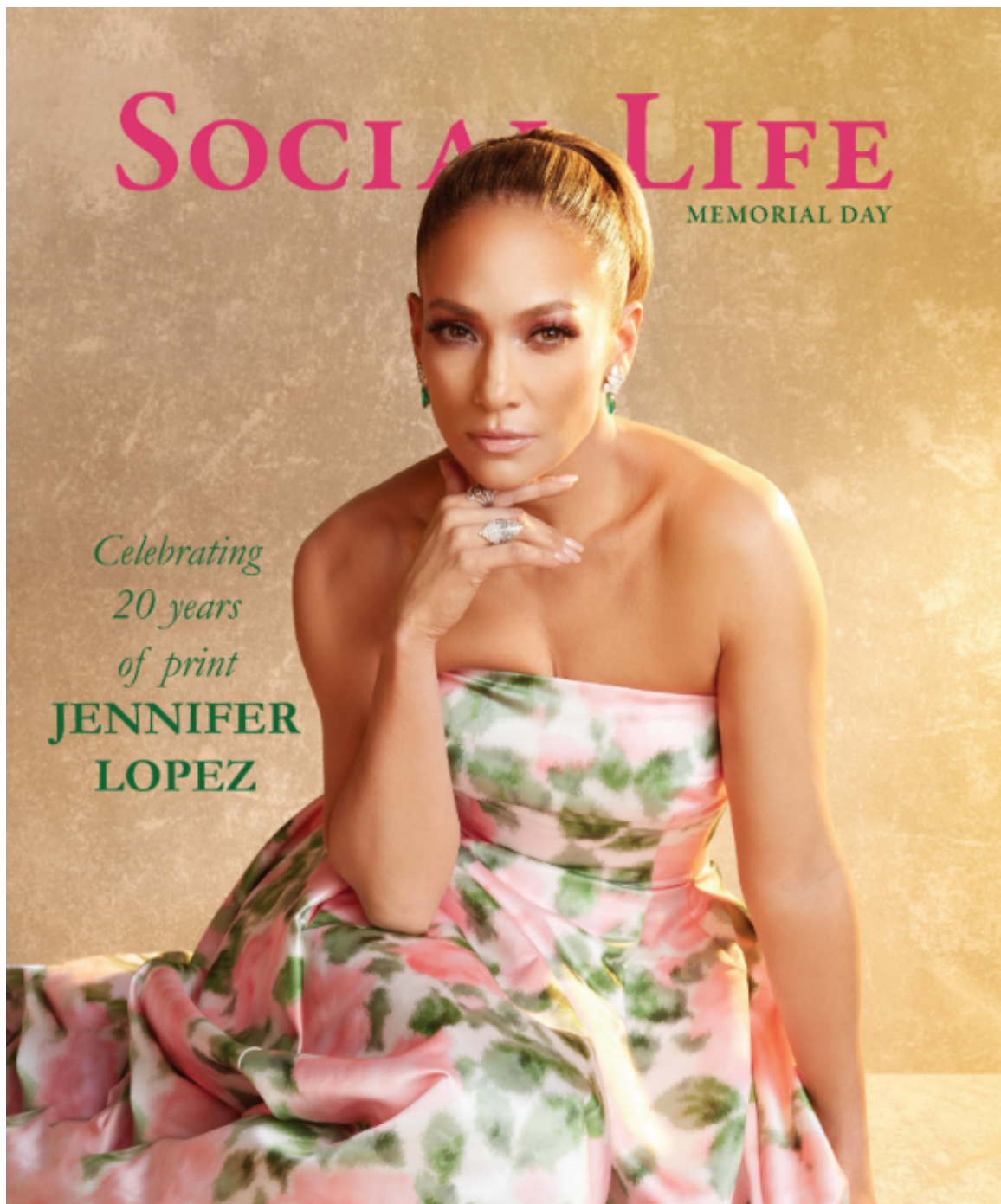


Date: May 30, 2023
Circulation: 120,000

SOCIAL LIFE
magazine



TRAVEL

VOYAGE TO CHAMPAGNE

By R. COURI HAY



R. Couri Hay is the travel editor and society columnist for this magazine. Couri began his career at Andy Warhol's Interview and he wrote for Town & Country and People. Couri also appears on CNN, PBS, FOX and VH1 commenting on Hollywood. He lives in NYC and Southampton and is the CEO of his own PR firm.



Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa, Photo Courtesy of Royal Champagne

ROYAL CHAMPAGNE HOTEL & SPA

It's a fast overnight flight to Paris, so once arrived, you're ready to jump into the luxury sedan sent by the Royal Champagne Hotel in Epernay. They whisk you to the romantic world of castles, châteaux, and vast vineyards of the varietals of grapes that ultimately become Champagne. There are over 370 Champagne houses using grapes from 20,000 farmers in the region. On the 90-minute drive from Paris, you roll through picturesque villages and miles of grapevines to arrive at a sleek, modern, low-slung hotel perched on a hill with the best views in Epernay, the seat of Champagne. The view from the hotel is like a Cézanne painting. The hamlet's ecru and terracotta-colored roofs surrounded by endless vineyards

is a perfect setting for this elegant 5-star hotel. My room was a minimalist wonder, spacious and chicly appointed in neutral tones, allowing the eyes to focus on the view through floor-to-ceiling windows leading onto the private balcony.

I arrived in late January, traditionally the quietest time of year when the vineyards are asleep, but the Champagne still flows, and the area's nine Michelin-starred restaurants are mostly still open because the region is becoming a year-round destination. The hotel also possesses a world-class spa with both indoor and outdoor Olympic-length pools heated to resemble a dip in the warm waters of St. Barts. There's a sauna and steam room and a wide variety of treatments. I had a massage, a facial, and a glass of Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blanc Champagne to

TRAVEL

put me in the perfect mood. The hotel has lovely restaurants and bars, including the one-Michelin-starred Le Royal, and a breakfast buffet that was nothing less than sublime. Dinner was also a treat, and the service was impeccable, both for the humans and dogs. Yes, I encountered two dogs, a brown Rhodesian ridgeback and an adorable tri-color King Charles cavalier spaniel, sitting quietly at the table next to ours. Très Français, n'est-ce pas?



Josephine Suite, Photo Courtesy of Royal Champagne

CUISINE SOLUTIONS' INTERNATIONAL SOUS VIDE DAY

I spent my first day at the celebration of International Sous Vide Day hosted by Cuisine Solutions, the world's largest and most trusted producer of sous vide foods. The event, held at the picturesque Château Comtesse Lafond, also celebrated the 81st birthday of Dr. Bruno Gossault, the master of sous vide and the greatest scientific innovator of the technique. Guests included the company's chairman, Stanislas Vilgrain; the chief strategy officer, the chef Gerard Bertholon; and the CMO, Tom Donohoe. During the event, Donohoe surprised his girlfriend, Allison Sells, by asking her to marry him, with a diamond the size of the Ritz. She said yes, and no fewer than 14 Michelin-starred chefs led the applause. Cuisine Solutions held concurrent sous vide celebrations in Washington, DC, and Bangkok – the company has a significant presence in North America and Asia, as well as Europe.

LE PARC LES CRAYÈRES

On another night, I went to the very grand two-Michelin-starred restaurant Le Parc Les Crayères. We had the truffle tasting-menu, each course paired with the appropriate Champagne, including an extraordinary bottle of Jacques Selosse V.O. that took us to the heavens. In truth, every course was celestial. Standouts were the roasted scallops with black truffle slices and the black truffle capellini. The chocolate cream, caramelized pecans, and cherry confit with truffles were magnifique. It's the only way, really! The restaurant is in the Domaine

Les Crayères, a small hotel formerly the chateau of the De Polignac family, which had a long history as part of the French nobility. In 1775, Yolande Martine Gabrielle de Polastron, Duchess of Polignac, became a favorite of Marie Antoinette, and subsequently spent years living at the Palace of Versailles.



Le Parc Dining Room, Photo Courtesy of Le Domaine Les Crayères



Le Domaine Les Crayères, Photo Courtesy of Le Domaine Les Crayères

AVENUE DE CHAMPAGNE

A tour of the Champagne houses is *de rigueur*, but plan ahead as these private tours book up quickly. The first thing you need to ask your driver to do is ride down Epernay's famous avenue de Champagne. Along the treelined road you'll pass all the grand mansions of Champagne, including Ruinart, Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, and Krug, among many other houses whose vintages are superb but not as well known outside France. Ask your concierge for a few ideas if you're in the mood to be adventurous.

Champagne has a long history, going back to the fifth century, when the Romans planted vineyards in this region of northeastern France. The pinot noir grapes that thrived in this climate produced a pale, pinkish wine, far different from the lush reds from the central Burgundy region. It was an accident of nature that created the bubbly we know and love today.

The cold winters in Champagne caused fermentation to halt and restart in the spring, releasing carbon dioxide trapped inside the bottles. The pressure from the gas often caused the bottles to explode, but those that survived contained bubbles, which was originally considered a flaw. In the 1600s, winemakers, like the Benedictine Monk Dom Pérignon, were still trying to rid their wines of bubbles, but the sparkling versions of Champagne wines grew in popularity, eventually becoming a favorite among the French nobility. By the 19th century, winemakers had learned how to create bubbles deliberately, and advances in these methods by the house of Veuve Clicquot made the production of sparkling wine on a large scale feasible. Champagne houses blossomed in the 1800s, and the modern Champagne industry was born.



House of Pommery, Photo Courtesy of Pommery

HOUSE OF POMMERY

If you can visit only one house, I suggest Pommery because it has the most extensive and dramatic chalk caves — twelve miles to be exact — almost 100 feet belowground, which serve to ventilate the cellars. There is also a large and fun art installation throughout: a giant tree festooned with oversize fruit, an enormous glass box that blows a blizzard of feathers, giant screens of crashing waves, and another depicting a storm in a forest. The caves also have carved sculptures on the walls, some permanent, some temporary, the remnants of past art exhibitions. Madame Pommery, who created the estate in 1868 after her husband's death, and her daughter, Louise, were art lovers and patrons of up-and-coming artists. The company continues to support artists today, hosting annual exhibitions in the cellars.



Pommery's "Gigantesque!" Photo Courtesy of Pommery

TRAVEL



Maison Ruinart, Photo Courtesy of Ruinart

Bring your walking shoes. I counted 121 steps to get down to the cave, but it's worth it. Over 25 million bottles of Champagne are stored there. You read that right! Along the corridors, you'll see the different sized bottles, including Piccolos, Salmanazars, Balthazars, Nebuchadnezzars, and Goliaths. You can tour on your own or with a private guide (which I suggest), and at the end is a tasting of different vintages. Pace yourself.

HOUSE OF RUINART

The Benedictine monk Dom Thierry Ruinart, a native of Champagne, spent time in Paris in the 17th century, where young aristocrats were enthusiastic about an exciting new wine with bubbles. Dom Ruinart traveled widely but eventually returned to his home turf, working in the wine cellars alongside another monk, Dom Pérignon. Together, the two developed

Artist Liu Bolin x Ruinart, Photo Courtesy of Ruinart





Champagne Ruinart Poster, Photo Courtesy of Ruinart



Maison Ruinart Décor, Photo Courtesy of Ruinart

methods to improve sparkling wine production, solving the problem of bottles exploding under pressure during the fermentation process.

Dom Ruinart's nephew Nicolas Ruinart took up his uncle's interest in winemaking and, in 1729, founded Maison Ruinart, the world's first Champagne house. Louis XV had just authorized the transport of wine in bottles rather than barrels; this meant Ruinart's Champagne could be sold throughout France and beyond. In 1768 Ruinart acquired its Roman-era chalk quarries, and five miles of tunnels 125 feet below the city of Reims were hollowed out to store bottles. Classified as a historical monument in 1931, these chalk *crayères*, providing stable temperatures and perfect humidity levels, make for a fascinating tour. The Ruinart Blanc de Blanc pressing is one of my favorite Champagnes.

HOUSE OF DOM PÉRIGNON

Dom Pierre Pérignon, the Benedictine monk whose efforts shaped the foundation of the champenoise method, making the production of sparkling wine commercially viable, is so revered that his statue stands at the entrance to Moët & Chandon's headquarters in Epernay. When he died in 1715, he was buried in a part of the abbey cemetery traditionally reserved only for abbots as a show of respect.

The Pérignon House is in the former Benedictine Abbey of Hautvillers on a hillside overlooking the Marne Valley. Originally founded in AD 650, the abbey was destroyed and rebuilt more than once through the centuries. The current building, where Pérignon lived and worked for 47 years, went up in the 16th century with the support of Catherine de' Médici. Who else would tell you these things?

HOUSE OF KRUG

The House of Krug was founded in 1843 by visionary Joseph Krug with the goal of blending wines from different years to consistently produce the very best. Krug's singular approach has given it the reputation as haute couture Champagne, and you will taste it on your tour. Its signature Krug Grande Cuvée is aged for over 20 years. Housed in the family's circa 1868 estate, the House of Krug features a collection of unique relics, including a portrait of the founder and his notebook containing his vision for his Grand Cuvée. A wall of 400

TRAVEL



The Abbey of Hautvillers at Dom Pérignon, Photo by Richard Newton

wines is where the cellar master auditions wines to be used in creating each year's new edition; a music room contains the reserve wines; and the Krug yurt in the garden is where you'll experience immersive "echoes" tastings, where wine is paired with music.

HOUSE OF VEUVE CLICQUOT & ITS GHOST

Founded in 1772 by the trader Philippe Clicquot-Muiron and taken over in 1798 by his son, François, this renowned Champagne house truly blossomed with a woman at the helm. When François unexpectedly died, his widow (*veuve* in French), Barbe, took over the business. She proved to be a passionate winemaker, introducing innovations like the recipe for rosé Champagne, still used by most modern Champagne houses today.

The house's history is noteworthy. Its 15 miles of chalk cellars date to the Middle Ages. A faded Red Cross sign on the chalk walls is a reminder of when the cellars were used as an infirmary during World War I. Also on display is one of 46 antique Veuve Clicquot bottles found in 2010 in an early 19th-century wreck at the bottom of the Baltic Sea, near Finland's

Föglö Islands. Madame Clicquot's original mansion is still used by the company for visiting VIP guests. I encountered Barbe's charming ghost when I slept in her bedroom. Have you ever?

HOUSE OF TAITTINGER

Pierre Taittinger bought a Champagne house in the 1930s and relaunched the business, offering elegant sparkling wines under the Taittinger name. The family's third generation still runs the house today. The Taittinger House, which includes the ruins of the 13th-century Saint-Nicaise Abbey, destroyed during the French Revolution, and UNESCO-listed Roman-era chalk caves, is undergoing a two-year renovation, so tastings have been detoured to the delightful Counts of Champagne residence in Reims.

Owned by Taittinger, the 13th-century Gothic-style pile — *Demeure des Comtes de Champagne* in French — served as the residence of the counts of Champagne when they came to Reims for the coronation of the kings of France at the Cathedral of Reims. After being partially destroyed during WW I, Taittinger bought it and restored it, and today it's used for cultural events.