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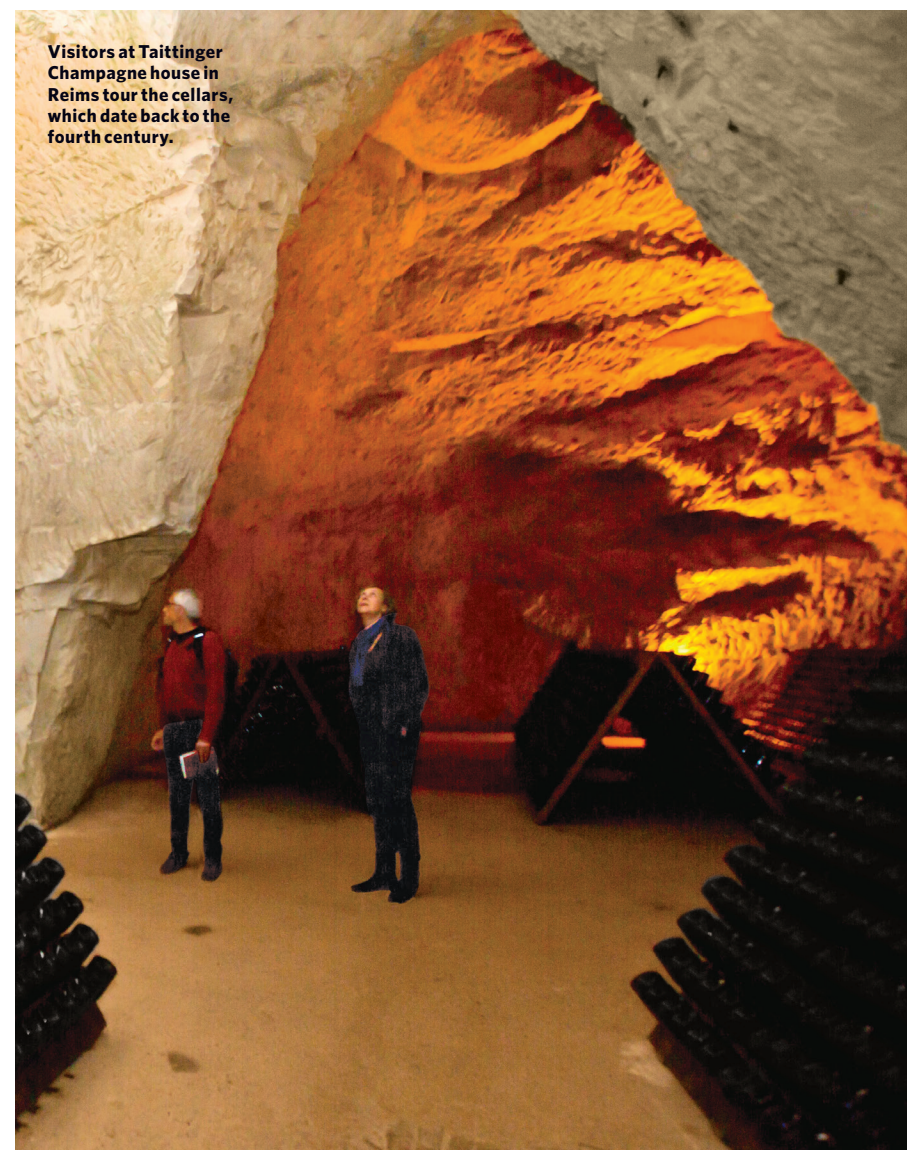


■ BREAK AWAY



TASTING CHAMPAGNE

Taking time to sip and savor in France's famed wine-producing region. **BY JENNIFER BUEGE**



Visitors at Taittinger Champagne house in Reims tour the cellars, which date back to the fourth century.

THE BUBBLES FLOAT up through the pale golden liquid, disappearing as they reach the surface. I'm on my fourth glass of Champagne and, surprisingly for this lightweight, am stone-cold sober as I try to identify the differences among the various Taittinger offerings in front of me.

I smell. I sip. I swirl the wines around in my mouth, the bubbles tap-dancing on my tongue. I jot down notes about each one: the mix of chardonnay and pinot noir, the number of years spent in the cellar, the origin of the grapes. Each example is excellent—amazing, in fact—yet my untrained taste buds are a bit confounded, unable to pick out the subtle distinctions separating them. At first I'm frustrated by my lack of discernment. Then I shrug and tell myself: This is why you're here.

As a frequent visitor to France, I've had plenty of opportunity to indulge in French food and wine. But this is the first time I've made it to the motherland of one of my favorite beverages, the effervescent wine produced in an area just 45 minutes away from Paris by high-speed train. The Champagne region welcomes millions of tourists each year who come to indulge in tastings at some of the best producers in the business. I've landed at the celebrated family-run Taittinger house in Reims, along with a handful of other enthusiasts, to learn more about the wine's journey from vineyard to bottle.

Giving our palates a rest, we head 60 feet below street level to the cellars that date back to the fourth century, when they were chalk pits. The air is cool, the walls worn, the yellowish light dim. As we explore, it's easy to imagine the 13th-century monks who made wine here when the cellar was the Saint-Nicaise Abbey or the soldiers who huddled in these depths during World War I, some scratching their names—still visible, palpable—into the walls. The

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caves act not just as a keeper of wine but of history, with the current chapter being written by Pierre-Emmanuel Taittinger and two of his children, Vitalie and Clovis.

With his unruly gray curls, joie de vivre and willingness to talk about anything, the 63-year-old Pierre-Emmanuel challenges the image I'd had in my head of a Champagne house CEO. "I am very eccentric," he tells us at lunch the next day at Château de la Marquetterie, Taittinger's stunning vineyard-encircled property. "I am probably the most eccentric person of Champagne today. But I am extremely serious in terms of quality. You can be eccentric when you are sure that what you propose is exceptional."

As if to prove his point, he pours us a 1999 Comtes de Champagne. It tastes like pure heaven, smooth and fruity and full. Yet, I sigh: Although my taste buds know immediately that this is something special, I'm still not able to voice precisely why.

The conversation wanders, hitting on politics, family and life in general. "The *mystère* is the center of everything," Pierre-Emmanuel says. "When I see people who want to understand everything, I think they are crazy. Life is a miracle." His words have an immediate impact on me: Perhaps, I think, it's enough for now to simply enjoy Champagne without having to unravel its complexities, its mystery. The pressure off, I sit back, relax and say *oui* to another glass. ▽

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