
CHAMPAGNE

TOP OF THE POPS

A brief but thorough guide to Champagne by
Michèle Shah – the grapes, the growth, the
processes that make this glorious wine

Nothing is more titillating than popping a bottle of Champagne. Its very name evokes the tingle of celebration. Known as “the wine of kings and the king of wines”, as far back as the 9th century in the time of the Emperor Charlemagne, Champagne was a rich agricultural area. Today, Champagne is the industry leader in French wine and spirits, to the tune of 4.7 billion euros, of which 2.6 billion come from export.

The Champagne appellation today covers 33,762 ha, representing 4% of France’s total vineyard area and producing some 309 million bottles, comprising 13% by volume of world consumption of sparkling wines. Its exports reach more than 190 countries, with the main export markets being the UK with 36 million bottles and USA with 20.5 million bottles.

The heart of the Champagne region lies 145 km to the northeast of Paris. The vibrant

city of Reims is a good starting point to tour the Champagne area and has all the feel of a bustling regional capital. The old city is dominated by the 13th century cathedral – one of the great gothic cathedrals of northern France – which is a UNESCO world heritage site. The famous combed vineyards of Champagne lie on the chalky hills to the southwest of Reims, and around the town of Epernay.

The Champagne area is generally divided into three parts – the Montagne de Reims, the Vallée de la Marne and the Côte des Blancs. The Aube region, 110 km to the southeast, is important for wines that go into many of the non-vintage blends of the major champagne houses.

The subsoil in Champagne is predominantly limestone. So too are the outcrops of sedimentary rock (75% limestone), composed of chalk, marl and limestone proper which provides for good drainage and also imparts that particular mineral flavour

found in certain Champagne wines.

Sloping vineyards are so much a feature of Champagne, that in the 17th century its wines were known as *vin de coteaux* (wine of the slopes). The terrain, from undulating to moderately steep, creates ideal vineyard sites that combine good drainage with excellent exposure to sunlight. The manicured landscapes, the abundance of lush green in the spring and summer and the history that one breathes while visiting the wineries is truly magical.

The main grape varieties found in Champagne can almost be divided into one-thirds, with Pinot Noir taking the slightly larger share, followed by Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay. Yields are kept to a low of 10,600 kg per hectare, to keep the grapes healthy and dry and aid their ripening. Each Champagne grape variety has its own unique personality, which is expressed at its purest in single-varietal Champagne wines: *Un blanc de blancs* blended exclusively from white Chardonnay grapes, *un blanc de noirs* blended exclusively from red Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier.

Cru, the French term for “growth”, refers to a certain winegrowing location with a particular growing environment, especially with regard to soil and climate, which favours a particular grape variety. Champagne is represented by 320 crus and 275,000 individual vineyard parcels, each with its own specific profile.

Back in the time of the monasteries, blending was an automatic part of the winemaking process. Grapes were delivered by local farmers as payment of their tithes to the church, and then pressed collectively, regardless of differences in grape variety or vineyard site. Blending became an art in the hands of notable monastic winemakers, such as the monk, Dom Perignon, bursar of the Abbey of Hautvilliers in Champagne. Their particular expertise lay in combining selected grapes

CHAMPAGNE: KEY MARKET STATISTICS

Human Data

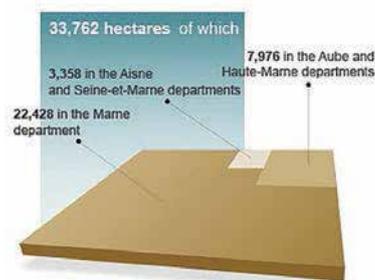
15,800
winegrowers



300
Champagne houses



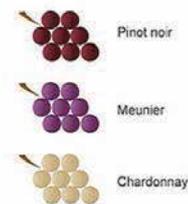
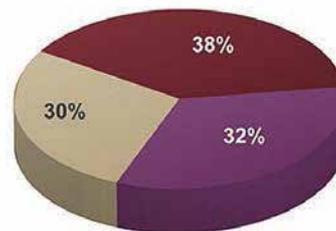
Productive Area



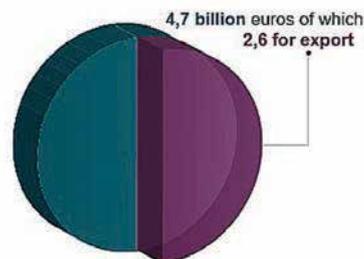
Harvest



Grape Varieties



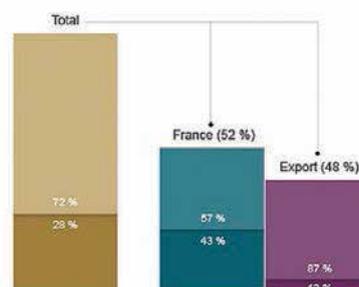
Value



Stocks (at July 31st, 2015)



Shipments



TOTAL	
312,531,444 bottles	
223,548,634 by Champagne houses	
88,982,810 by winegrowers and co-operatives	
FRANCE	
161,822,697 bottles	
91,934,709 by Champagne houses	
68,887,988 by winegrowers and co-operatives	
EXPORT	
150,708,747 bottles	
131,613,925 by Champagne houses	
19,094,822 by winegrowers and co-operatives	

■ Top Ten Export Markets (bottles)



Source : Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne – 2016

of various origins to improve the balance of the finished wine. Many years later, the Champagne houses adopted the same approach, exploiting the rich diversity of their terroir by blending wines from different grape varieties, different sites and even different vintages to create more harmonious wines.

Non-vintage Champagne wines are traditionally blended from grapes grown in different vintages, but they may also combine wines from a whole range of crus and varieties – it all depends on the style of the Champagne house. Non-vintage blends are the means to achieve a consistent house style regardless of vintage variability. The house style is unique to each brand of Champagne. Today many of the smaller houses are looking to vintage variability in order to make their product more true to the terroir. Vintage Champagne is blended from the wines of a single “millésime”: a single outstanding year that the individual producer chooses to declare as a vintage.

All Champagne wines must spend at least 15 months ageing in the producer’s cellars. This increases to three years for Vintage Champagne and considerably longer for the Special Cuvées. Time brings out the richness and flavour of Champagne wines. Bonne Santé! ♦

Les Avisés hotel, a handsome neo-classical mansion in the heart of the Côte des Blancs area



VISITING CHAMPAGNE

INFORMATION YOU CAN USE

WHEN TO GO May, June and July are the best months to enjoy the beautiful green vines and sunny blue skies. Also, the harvest months of September and October

HOW TO GET THERE Fly to Charles de Gaulle airport and then take the RER train to Reims or rent a car at Paris airport on arrival

WHERE TO STAY Relais Châteaux Hôtel Restaurant Les Crayeres. A handsome château in 17 acres of grounds on the outskirts of Reims, situated next to the Pommery champagne house. It has an excellent restaurant with two Michelin stars and a more affordable Le Jardin Brasserie. Chef Philippe Mille’s gourmet restaurant has a wine list featuring more than 600 champagne labels.

■ Relais Châteaux Hôtel Restaurant L’Assiette Champenoise just outside Reims in Tinquieux has three star Michelin restaurant with great food by chef Arnaud Lallement. Suites have recently been refurbished.

■ Les Avisés situated on the hills of Avize, in the heart of the Côte des Blancs area. A magnificent neo-classical mansion, associated with wine production since 1820. The hotel offers ten rooms as well as an excellent restaurant run by chef Stéphane Rossillon and his wife Nathalie. Great wine list and excellent value lunch menu.

■ Villa Eugène in Epernay. Magnificent 19th century villa set in a park. Its 15 rooms have been newly renovated. An outdoor heated swimming pool.

■ **Hôtel de la Paix** in Reims. Located in the heart of Reims, a stone's throw from the Cathedral. Spacious rooms and an outstanding Champagne bar offering one of the best selections from the region.

■ **La Chevalée** in Hautvillers (3.69 kms from Épernay). A small B&B in the charming village of Hautvillers, overlooking the vineyards. Family atmosphere, offering two comfortable suites.

RESTAURANTS Racine Just a few steps away from Notre-Dame Cathédral in Reims. Chef Kazuyuki Tanaka creates a fusion between his country's cuisine and that of France. A unique style mixed with rich flavours.

■ **L'Épicerie Au Bon Manger** in Reims. Delicatessen-bistro with artisan and terroir focused food and wines. Wines are offered by the glass. The dishes are simple and everything is prepared to order.

■ **Le Bocal** Wonderful, well-priced fish restaurant in Reims located at the back of the Poissonnerie des Halles. Good value fish of the day. Excellent selection of shellfish, including oysters to accompany an equally good selection of Champagne at a reasonable price.

■ **Les Berçeaux Restaurant and Bistrot** Traditional hotel and restaurant in the centre of Epernay. Chef Patrick Michelin offers seasonal creations of classic and contemporary dishes. Good value with excellent varied menu and selective wine list.

■ **Restaurant Le Millénaire** In the centre of Reims. High-level cuisine created by talented Michelin starred chef, Laurent Thibault Laplaige and his son. Ingredients and pairings of flavours and textures make this cuisine very special.

CHAMPAGNE HOUSES: **Champagne Jacques Selsos in Avize** Anselme Selsos, a small winery and an iconic producer with highly individual style wines and a profound sense of terroir. Said to be the man most responsible for the revolution that's changing the face of Champagne.

■ **Champagne Eric Rodez in Ambonnay.** Small, iconic Champagne house, ninth generation family winery. Recently converted by Eric Rodez

Champagne Jacquesson from Jacquesson & Fils a family-owned winery in Dizy, Champagne



to biodynamic production with a great respect for terroir. Excellent Cuvée del Grands Vintages.

■ **Champagne Moussé Fils in Cuisles** Small family-owned winery in the heart of the Marne river valley in the village of Cuisles. Production focused on Blanc de Noirs Champagne mainly from Pinot Meunier with very individual character. Fiercely committed to environmental protection.

■ **Champagne Jacquesson in Dizy** Family-owned winery belonging to the Chiquet brothers. Elegant wines with a continuity in style from one year to the next.

■ **Champagne AR Leonble in Damery** Medium-sized, family-owned winery. Sister-and-brother Anne and Antoine Malassagne awarded "Haute Valeur Environnementale" certification for environmentally conscious winery. Vineyards in Chouilly, Bisseuil and Damery, with elegant crus from Côte des Blancs.

■ **Champagne Ruinart in Reims** Now part of the LVMH, Champagne Ruinart was the first champagne house, established in 1729. Each of its cuvées bears the distinctive signature of Chardonnay, the house's emblematic grape variety. Historic cellars date back to the Roman chalk quarries and are a must visit.

■ **Champagne Collet in Ay** A cooperative with a fascinating history and museum, well worth visiting. Based in Ay, in the heart of Champagne. Sources grapes predominantly from Premier and Grand Crus, and as a result, reflects the diversity of terroirs within Champagne. Excellent value Champagnes. ❖