



Domaine Les Crayeres, let the champagne flow

Upon crossing the gate of this 19th century castle, the essence of the 19th century comes into play through the upholstered walls, chandeliers, bed canopies, paintings, lamps and other details that take us back in time.

By Manena Munar

During the journey to Domaine Les Crayeres in Reims, fog takes over the landscape as soon as the tower of a church appears on the horizon, and in the fields, dry vines wait for spring to shed their first tear. These are vineyards of pinot noir, meunier, and chardonnay, the three grapes that, after blending for an appropriate combination of sugar and acidity, will become champagne.

Upon arriving in Reims, the epicenter of the Champagne region, a visit to the Notre-Dame de Reims Cathedral is a priority. For over a thousand years, this cathedral was the site of the coronation of French kings, and it was also where the ceremony of peace between France and Germany was celebrated after World War II. Among the many architectural and interior decoration excellences, the

stained glass windows and rose windows stand out, both dating back to the 13th century and those designed by Marc Chagall in 1974.

THE FIRST GLASS

Domaine Les Crayeres, a 19th century castle, is the ideal place to taste the first glass of champagne, such as Taittinger, a beloved house of Relais & Châteaux for the magnificence of its wine and the close relationship that has long united Les Crayeres and Taittinger.

Upon closing the garden gate and crossing the threshold of the hotel, the 21st century disappears and the 19th century comes into play through the upholstered walls, chandeliers, bed canopies, paintings, lamps and other details, whose purpose, despite having been recreated in our era, is to transport those who choose to enjoy it back in time. In addition to all of this, there is the hospitality that characterizes the 580 hotels and restaurants in 65 countries that make up the Relais & Châteaux seal of excellence. Hospitality led in Domaine Les Crayeres by the general manager, Arnaud Valary, who discreetly anticipates even the smallest detail that could make the customer's life enjoyable: true luxury.

LAURENT GARDINIER, NEW PRESIDENT OF RELAIS & CH TEAUX

Laurent Gardinier took over from the previous president, Philippe Gombert, on January 1st, 2023. Gardinier, along with his brothers, co-owns Domaine Les Crayeres in Champagne and the Parisian restaurant Le Taillevent.

During an interview with the new president in the glass-walled bar of La Rotonda, Gardinier talks about how one of his projects is to maintain the family union of Relais & Châteaux and to ensure the idiosyncrasy of each establishment, in its architecture and location, but above all through local gastronomy. He sees sustainability as a top priority, always based on the environmental possibilities of each member of the seal, which unites them with the application of practical and realistic solutions.

A FAMILY HISTORY

As you make your way to the Châteaux de la Marquetterie, the ancestral mansion of the Taittinger family, you can observe the carpet of vineyards that covers the Champagne region. As Vitalie Taittinger (fourth generation), current president of Maison Taittinger since 2020 with the support of her brother Clovis (general manager), points out, the chalky terroir, which has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2015, meets the necessary requirements to grow the vines that, once blended, fermented, and rested in bottles for three to five years, will produce the delicate bubbles and delicious flavor that characterizes the most

sensual of wines. In fact, at one time, Champagne, along with sherry, was the preferred wine of royalty and aristocracy.

Vitalie Taittinger is a young woman whose intelligence is evident in her gaze and discourse, speaking passionately about what has become the purpose of her life, even though she initially wanted to pursue art, specifically painting. However, that creativity has led her to focus on building a grand future for the world of champagne, where she has incorporated her artistic flair. Labels on the bottles have featured designers of the caliber of Victor Vasarely in the 1978 vintage, Sebastião Salgado in 2008, Roy Lichtenstein, and Arman.

Vitalie believes that maintaining tradition is essential, as is innovation. She is greatly concerned about climate change, for which the Champagne region is already preparing. She speaks of the importance of family values, legacy, and respect in her way of managing Maison Taittinger. These are premises she inherited from her grandfather, whom she comments, with a mischievous smile, was quite interesting, as were her parents: her mother, dedicated to music, would walk with her children for at least two hours every day in nature. Meanwhile, at the table, a series of glasses are paired with excellent food.

As an appetizer, a Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs 2012 (an exceptional harvest) 100% Chardonnay was chosen. For the gazpacho, a Comtes de Champagne Rosé 2009 was selected to match the flavor and color of the Spanish

dish. And so, glass after glass is brought to the table, until the one that accompanies the fruit soup with vanilla and hibiscus syrup, a Taittinger Nocturne Rosé.

Vitalie emphasizes how champagne has always been intimately linked to women. She evokes the well-known ladies of champagne, such as Barbe-Nicole Clicquot-Ponsardin, the famous Veuve Clicquot, and Lilly Bollinger, whose response to when she drank champagne has become a maxim: "I drink it when I'm happy and when I'm sad. Sometimes I drink it when I'm alone. When I have company I consider it obligatory. I trifle with it if I'm not hungry and drink it when I am. Otherwise, I never touch it—unless I'm thirsty."

As Voltaire once said, champagne is the only drink that makes women more beautiful after they drink it.

THE LADY OF ROSES

Jeanne Alexandrine Louise Melin, also known as Madame Louise Pommery, was a true visionary who adored roses. At the age of 39, after the death of her husband who introduced her to the world of wine, she founded Pommery Champagne in 1858 with Narcisse Greno. To the astonishment of the region, she purchased 75 hectares with 60 chalk pits (crayers) that were 30 meters deep and 18 kilometers long, innovating the way champagne was stored in underground tunnels. Not only that, but Madame Pommery also created Pommery Nature, the first brut

champagne to hit the market. Although it initially shocked society accustomed to the sweetness of previous champagnes, it quickly became a favorite.

After many years, in 1996, Belgian businessman Paul Vranken bought the winery that now bears the name Vranken-Pommery. Today, its underground cellars have been transformed into the Pommery Experience, where annual exhibitions of international artists are held in the most surreal of settings.

Descending the 116 steps that lead to the chalk pits, gigantic flowers made of various materials give way to the dreamlike exhibition dedicated to Rêverie ('Dreaming'). A succession of imaginary worlds, like something out of Alice in Wonderland, where you can find the tree with fruit illuminated by the moon by Choi Jeong Hwa, the white, ghostly sculptures by Berdaguer and Pejús, or the impressive marble pillow by Javier Pérez.

On the spectacularly phantasmagoric tour of the crayers, you can observe caves with the name of a place: Madrid, Normandy, London... where Madame Pommery stored orders destined for the site listed on the plaque. To continue the special journey, a bottle of Pommery Brut Vintage Champagne awaits, opened among the floating feathers, wrapped in crystal, by Anne-Flore Cabanais, part of the fantastical exhibition.

TWO MICHELIN STARS

To not break the reverie of the Pommery universe, dinner with Philippe Mille, chef at Domaine les Crayeres, at Le Jardin Brasserie was another dream come true. Philippe was born in Sarthe, surrounded by love for the land, its products, and family cooking, especially when visiting his uncles' and grandparents' farms in the countryside. This passion is reflected in Les Crayeres, which holds two Michelin stars at the Le Parc restaurant, where he has a vegetable garden with his seasonal produce that ends up on a plate decorated with art, accompanying the most delicious of veal, lobster, foie gras... among other delicacies.

According to Philippe, the touch of beauty that characterizes his dishes is due to his Japanese influence, a country he admires and respects to the point that he has opened a restaurant in Tokyo. Philippe Mille works in tandem with sommelier Philippe Jamesse, whose wine list offers more than 600 references to champagne that come to the table: an Adrien Bergere Blanc de Blancs to accompany the lobster croq, Lason Collection 1985 for the golden sea bass, and a Veuve Fortuny Rosé that pairs with the sublime veal in its juice. The sweet liqueur, ratafia, cannot be missing to accompany the apple tatin.

A PARISIEN CASTLE

The exclusive world of Relais & Châteaux still holds a surprise, this time in Paris, with the opening of the legendary Saint James. Located in the center of Paris, in

the 16th district, a ten-minute walk from the Eiffel Tower, Champs-Élysées, and the Place de l'Étoile, this 19th-century castle redesigned by Laura González is a symbol of the French art of living. Its library bar is a tempting place to spend the afternoon reading one of its books. Next door is the Michelin-starred Bellefeuille, run by chef Julien Dumas, who excels with seasonal cuisine and organic vegetables from the garden.

The rooms at the Saint James are cheerful and cozy, and come with all the possible amenities. The recently opened Guerlain Spa offers delightful treatments, and for further relaxation there's a 15-meter pool. It's no wonder that, among other celebrities, Robert De Niro stayed at the Saint James during one of his shoots. The actor left his mark on the gin and tonic that bears his name. Olivia de Havilland, despite having a beautiful house in Paris, decided to spend three of her final years at the hotel, which fondly remembers her and where she celebrated her centenary.

The final touch to an unforgettable trip was dinner at the traditional and superb Le Taillevent, the former mansion of the Duke of Morny that now boasts two Michelin stars thanks to Italian chef Giuliano Sperandio, who takes on French cuisine and creates a symphony of classics that he reinterprets with mastery. Le Taillevent welcomes guests with a glass of Taittinger before moving on to the subtle pairings of a wine list with 2,800 references.

And one cannot leave Paris without taking a nocturnal glance at the Arc de Triomphe illuminated by the beam that shines from the Eiffel Tower.