

A SIP OF FRANCE

A tour of the Alsace and Champagne wine routes naturally provides wines to sample and plenty of food for thought, **Mao Ning** discovers.

France is best known for being the home of luxury goods and Paris, but a wine tour offers unrivaled scenery and valuable cultural insights. As part of "Experience France with Wine Tours", a three-year program rolled out by the French Ministry of Agriculture, to acquaint more Chinese visitors with France's wine culture, I joined a small group of reporters touring the Alsace and Champagne wine routes.

We set out from Colmar, a small city some 70 km southwest of Strasbourg, capital of France's Alsace province, which borders Germany and Switzerland.

A border region, France and Germany have fought over it for centuries. As a result, it has inherited and blended both cultures to create its own unique architectural style, cuisine and language.

Our arrival in tranquil and picturesque Colmar was like stepping into the past, without a single high-rise in sight. For me, used to the hustle and bustle of Beijing, it was too quiet at first.

On both sides of the streets are timber-framed houses in pink, yellow, brown, green and white, mostly built during the Middle Ages. It was like strolling around in an open-air museum.

In the old days, Colmar was a trading post and river port, and had its heyday in the 16th century, when merchants shipped their wine along the waterways running through the canal quarter, now known as Petite Venise (Little Venice).

Today, Colmar is the center of the Alsace Wine Route of 119 towns and villages stretching 170 km along the Vosges Mountains, where most of the region's vineyards are located.

The medieval village of Riquewihr is surrounded by some of the finest vineyards in Alsace and has retained much of its 16th century appeal.

Alleys, winding cobblestone streets, watchtowers and houses decked with colorful flowers make Riquewihr one of the most beautiful villages along the wine route.

In these villages, where most of the locals are vine growers or wine makers, one can easily find a cellar where the winery owner will proudly share their family's legacy with visitors.

Jean-Louis Lorentz-Klipfel is a fifth-generation winery owner in Barr, a village nestled in the hills. The family's two-story house doesn't look that special from the outside, but in the basement there is treasure.

More than 2 million bottles of wine are stored in the cellar, about 10 meters underground, of which more than 10,000 bottles are from 1919-70.

"It's our family tradition to keep some bottles of wine from each growing year, especially from the good years, for collection purposes instead of selling.

"I'm grateful to my great-grandfather who protected our wine collection from German invaders during World War II," Lorentz-Klipfel says.

While showing us around the cellar, Lorentz-Klipfel picks up a bottle from the family's 1943 production.

"The same bottles from my family's cellar were found in Hitler's bunker after his death," Lorentz-Klipfel says, not without a sense of pride.

He adds that he will carry on his family tradition and store old wine for the family "no matter how high the price".

Like many other winery owners, Lorentz-Klipfel started making connections with China two years ago and sold 80,000 bottles to the country in 2011.

"I've been to China three times over the past two years, and have just come back from a three-week trip to 10 Chinese cities in June," he says.

From Colmar, we head to Reims, about 300 km away. It's the capital of the Champagne region. I regret to say that, like many others, I previously used to call all sparkling wines Champagne.

"Actually, only those produced from grapes grown in the Champagne region and made in line with strictly regulated processes can be labeled Champagne," confirms Philippe Wibrotte, public relations manager of the Champagne Wine Association.

Every year, the association deals



Give me a healthy body for a long time, Give me jobs sometimes, Give me love from time to time, But give me Champagne all the time."

HAUVILLERS VILLAGERS' MORNING PRAYER

with brand-name infringements.

"We have more than 1,000 cases pending settlement, and there are 30-60 new cases arising every year," he says.

In France, if you think wine cellars merely serve as storage for bottles of wine, you are wrong. It is also a window of exploration for history, culture and art.

Champagne Pommery, a Champagne producer in Epernay, a small town near Reims, has wine cellars that are like entering an art gallery.

The arched cellars, 18 km in length and 30 meters underground, store about 20 million bottles of champagne, with the oldest dating back to 1874. But what fascinates ordinary visitors most are the ancient chalk pits and the artworks showcased inside.

About 300 ancient caves in the Reims region were once Roman quarries, dug in the 4th century. They had been abandoned until the 18th century, when the champagne industry flourished and wine cellars were dug for storing champagne.

Pommery House owns 120 of the caves, which have been fitted out and extended.

It is stunning to find exquisite bas-relief sculptures inside a wine cellar. Carved out of the limestone on the cave walls, four of these were created by Gustav Navlet in 1884, who spent four years working on the sculptures in the dim light.

The beautifully preserved bas-relief structures are today juxtaposed against contemporary art exhibitions of world-renowned artists.

Hautvillers, a small village on the outskirts of Epernay, is another elegant destination in the Champagne region.

What catches visitors' eyes most are the more than 140 wrought-iron signs hung on the front-facing walls of residential homes, vividly indicating the family business. It is a tradition inherited from the old days, when a significant number of villagers couldn't read.

As a fine vine-growing village in the Champagne region, Hautvillers has narrow streets and centuries-old houses. An old-fashioned *lavoir*, a public place to wash clothes, was built in 1832 and is still in use today. The village abbey, first constructed in AD 650 has been destroyed and



From top:
A small museum showcases traditional wine making tools in Alsace. Winery owner Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy works in his vineyard in Reims. The arched cellars of Champagne Pommery in Epernay store more than 20 million bottles. Notre-Dame de Reims is a World Heritage site.

renovated several times, but is now standing proud.

Hautvillers is best known around the world for Dom Perignon (1638-1715), a monk and cellar master, who resided at the Benedictine Abbey in Hautvillers for 40 years — and was buried here after his death. He was the first to blend various wines during the second fermentation and turned

plain still wine into sparkling wine.

Strolling around peaceful and quiet French villages like Hautvillers, one gets used to a slower-paced life, and it is easy to imagine what life was like in the old days.

On an old wall are written some lines for the villagers' morning prayer. Instead of being profound and religious, the words are simple and down-to-earth, providing a per-

fect understanding of life as it should be lived:

"Give me a healthy body for a long time,
Give me jobs sometimes,
Give me love from time to time,
But give me Champagne all the time."

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A magnet for wine lovers

The Alsace Wine Route is 170 km long and was inaugurated in 1953. It crisscrosses vineyards from north to south along the foothills of the Vosges Mountains. Designated as one of France's most beautiful tourist routes, it features wonderful landscapes, with more than 100 towns and villages dotting the vast Alsace vineyards.

The Alsace Wine Route is a magnet for wine lovers. The route leads to the doors of wine cellars and tasting rooms, most of which are open all year round to visitors. For the majority of tourists, perhaps, the charm of the trip lies in the exploration of picturesque medieval towns and villages.

Like many wine producers in the region who are showing a developing interest in the growing Chinese market, Alsace is making more efforts to attract Chinese tourists to the area.

According to Jean-Christophe Harray, an official from the Alsace Tourism Committee, most tourists to Alsace are from France and other European countries. Even so, Chinese tourists have increased significantly in recent years, with 20,000 nights recorded in the region in 2011, a 76 percent increase over the previous year.

Harray says while most tourists previously preferred to visit big cities like Paris, "now many have turned their eyes to small cities and towns with unique features".

The Alsace Wine Route is easily accessible by car from Alsace's main cities of Strasbourg, Colmar and Mulhouse. The TGV, or high-speed train, takes just over two hours to travel from Paris to Strasbourg and has a stop in Colmar, the center of the Alsace Wine Route.

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