

Chartwell  
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Ninth Edition

## First Class To Epernay

Champagne chilling in the fridge at home is a constant for us. Two rules apply...no special occasion is required to drink it, and when the bottle is removed, another must take its place.

This has been a happy situation over many years, so when our nephew announced his impending marriage four years ago, we eschewed the wedding gift list and decided to pass our "Champagne tip" to the next generation with the gift of a case to encourage them to continue this happy tradition. So it was then, when our niece announced her forthcoming nuptials, it seemed that a pilgrimage to Epernay to buy Champagne was called for.

This is a trip which demands a certain style... so started the search for an exceptional conveyance with sufficient capacity for enough bubbly for the newlyweds and a couple of cases for ourselves. Following a recommendation we found Prestige Cars. I ran a very careful eye over their stable of pristine supercars. I was looking for a something with British style, a long-legged touring car with room for luggage for three days plus the champagne. This seemed to be a challenging list of requirements for a high performance car.

In fact the final decision was easy... the Aston Martin Rapide stood out clearly.

The large boot would provide generous space for bags and champagne and the V12 six litre engine would sweep us along 'Rapidement' and in comfort and style. Booking and organising all the details was straightforward and after a quick run through on the details of the car from Prestige's Managing Director I set off home to pack.

After an early morning crossing via the Eurotunnel we set the satellite navigation for the Avenue de Champagne in Epernay. We swept majestically through Pas de Calais and Picardie at regulation speed with only the regular ping of the satellite navigation warning of speed cameras interrupting the blissful drive with the engine ticking over at 2,500 rpm; mostly!

Following a brief stop for lunch at an unpretentious restaurant in a tiny village, the owner came out to wave us off and confirmed my view: "C'est une tres jolie auto."

We were heading for the beautiful Villa Eugene, a boutique hotel that we had noticed on a previous trip. Its location on the Avenue de Champagne made it the ideal base perfect for our forays.

After an excellent dinner in the centre of Epernay, with the obligatory bottle of champagne and a great night's sleep, I nosed the Aston out and headed for No. 1 rue Sir Winston Churchill, the exquisite house and gardens, of Maison Pol Roger for an exclusive tour of the cellars.

Visiting the champagne house selected by Sir Winston and more recently for the royal wedding of Prince William and Miss Catherine Middleton was quite simply, an honour.

Parking the Aston Martin on the gravel outside the beautiful house we were met by Monsieur Laurent d'Harcourt the President of Pol Roger who had heard the Aston announcing our arrival.



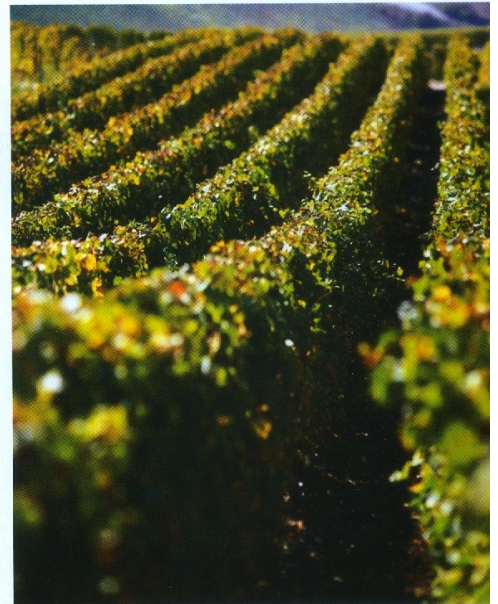




After a few minutes discussing cars (Mr d'Harcourt owns a vintage Peugeot), we moved inside into an intimate salon, the walls alive with photographs of members of the Pol Roger dynasty including, the founder, Pol Roger himself. Alongside these family portraits were images, telegrams, and letters from Sir Winston to his favourite Champagne house. Three wooden frames held golden medals with engravings of key events in the life of the legendary British Wartime leader.

After a brief overview of the company we were handed into the gracious company of Marketing Manager Matthieu Blanc who escorted us on a tour of the production facility and a fraction of the seven kilometres of cellars storing approximately nine million bottles of Pol Roger. The founding father of the house, Pol Roger, produced his first champagne for sale in the nearby village of Ay 1849. He moved to Epernay in 1851 having clearly seen the potential of exports to the UK he started making his dry Brut Champagne in 1855. Today the company has 52 employees yet produces 1.6 million bottles every year.

Epernay is the centre of the Champagne world, not just because it is surrounded by the perfect soil in which to grow the grapes which make Champagne but also because in the hillside beneath Epernay many generations have carved caves into the cool moist chalk up to 33 metres below the surface and these provide the ideal conditions to slowly develop the estimated 100 million bottles stored under the City.



The process of turning the local still white wine into champagne is long and highly complex. Matthieu explained that all of the grapes from specific areas or villages are pressed, stored and undergo a first fermentation separately. When this stage is completed, in early December, the cellar master starts the blending process and by February the key members of the family gather to taste and agree the final blend for each of the house's champagnes. The task takes so long because the wines are young and acidic. Up to 10 wines are tasted each day, with up to 100 to try.

Only when the wines have been blended is the decision made as to whether, in addition to all of the houses regular champagnes there may, in an exceptional year, be a vintage declared. We have walked the Avenue de Champagne many times and stared through the heavy metal





gates at the beautiful facade of the Pol Roger buildings, what is not clear from the outside is that inside is a highly modern wine making facility with huge floor to ceiling stainless steel tanks and the very latest technology. The company combines this investment in state of the art equipment with all the traditional methods of production and experience gathered over the years.

Once the blends have been finalised and after a final chilling in a tank to remove the last of the bi-products of the first fermentation, the raw wine is bottled and syrup of yeast and sugar added to start the magical process of turning the still white wine into sparkling Champagne. This second process creates sediment in the bottles, which must be removed, and this process is still a manual process for Pol Roger. Deep in the cool chalk tunnels far below the

factory and the Avenue de Champagne we met Pascal, fifth generation Riddler, whose job for the last 30 years has been to turn between 50 and 65,000 bottles every day in the inverted V shaped holders. He explained through Matthieu that although this process has been mechanised in many Epernay wineries; Pol Roger still do everything by hand as it is an exact process to ensure that all the sediment is removed and the champagne is perfect.

After each bottle has been turned about 25 times, the champagne is ready for disgorging. The neck of the bottle is frozen to allow the sediment or lees to be expelled in a small plug when the cap is removed. The level is then topped up with a small amount of additional wine and sugar, le dosage, and the final cork and wire is put back and the wine stored for a further 6 months before being labelled, packed

and made ready for the journey to our tables in the UK.

The UK drinks around one fifth of the Pol Roger Champagne which is exported and this is partly due to the link between Pol Roger and the greatest Englishman of the 20th Century, Sir Winston Churchill.

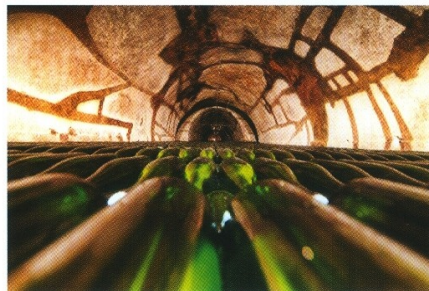
When we returned to the Maison, Mr d'Harcourt was waiting to answer all our questions about Pol Roger over an exceptional glass of the 2000 Cuvee Sir Winston Churchill.

We talked about the special Imperial pint bottles, which Pol Roger made for Sir Winston who drank Pol Roger at breakfast every day. The Imperial pint was the ideal size as Sir Winston viewed a half bottle as insufficient and Lady Churchill thought a full bottle was too much.

It's clear that Mr d'Harcourt would love to bring back the Imperial Pint, I am sure it would have huge resonance in the UK, but unfortunately current European legislation prevents a French company from producing Champagne in anything but metric bottle.

The 2002 Cuvee Sir Winston Churchill is launched on the 18th of June 2014, the anniversary of General de Gaulle's visit to London in 1944 to call for support for the French resistance. One week in advance, a team from Pol Roger will travel to London to present the vintage to the family of Winston Churchill. This is a tradition, which has been carried out since the launch of the cuvee.

Sir Winston Churchill first met Odette Pol-Roger when he travelled to Paris after the war to meet Duff Cooper. At this meeting he also encountered Odette and they went on





to develop a special friendship and Winston named one of his horses Pol Roger, a telegram is framed on the wall of the salon to Madame Pol-Roger from Churchill, declaring a win for her namesake.

During Sir Winston's latter years he drank the 1928 then the 1934 and finally the 1947 vintages up to the time of his death in 1965. Monsieur d'Harcourt shared his view that: "A magnum of champagne is the right size for two people - as long as one of them is not drinking!" As we left the Maison and said au-revoir to Mr d'Harcourt we complemented him on the beautiful lawn: "Ah, we have a specially imported British lawnmower."

After a brief lunch we started the serious business of buying Champagne. Epernay is blessed with many Champagne stores and we spent a very happy couple of hours tasting and selecting with great care. Just in case you plan a similar trip we have proved that the capacity of the Rapide, with luggage for two adults, is three and a half cases of Pol Roger, without any noticeable drop in the car's stunning performance.

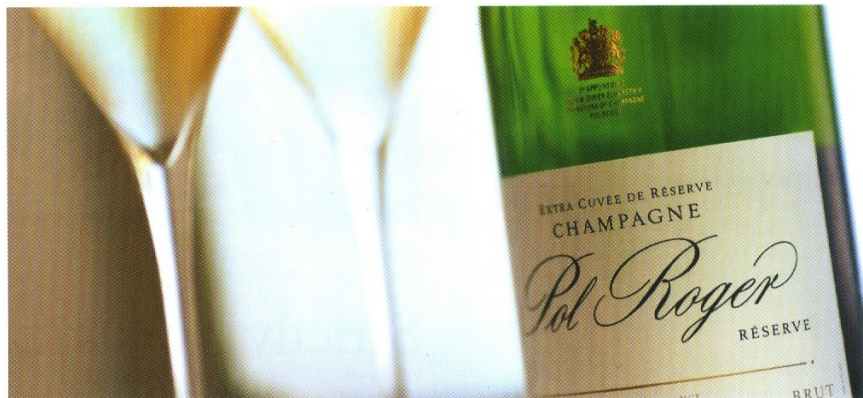
On our final day there was time for a leisurely breakfast in the beautiful orangery at the Villa Eugene before heading out to tour the vineyards'.

In early May the first grey green leaves and tiny juvenile grapes are starting to appear on the vines, the fields are a delicate green without their luxuriant foliage of summer and the vineyards' are dotted with the vans of workers who spend their days tending the vines. At this time of year they are thinning out the tiny youthful bunches restricting the numbers of bunches per vine to around 10 to 12. This ensures the mature grapes will have just the right balance of sugar and juice to make Champagne.

As it was getting close to lunch time and we hadn't had a glass of champagne for over 12 hours we started to look for somewhere to lunch, just as our first rustic stop had been wonderful the restaurant we found on the main road between Epernay and Reims was a culinary delight. Le Grand Cerf in Monchenot is a stunning Michelin starred restaurant, we were lucky and just walked in but I recommend you book so as not to be disappointed.

I am delighted to report that the Aston Martin's appeared totally oblivious to its load of joy and ate up the miles heading back through the thunderstorms as we headed towards the coast. I had decided to break up the journey back at a hotel we had stayed at on a previous

pre wedding champagne dash. The Château Cocove hotel is a family owned hotel in a stunning château built in 1741 in extensive and wonderfully tranquil tree lined grounds. It's the perfect spot to dine and rest before the final short dash to the channel tunnel and to carefully stick a bow on one of the cases of champagne and deliver it to our niece with the learned advice that always having a bottle in the fridge and always having an excuse to drink it, even on a wet Wednesday evening is one of our key tenets for a long and happy marriage.



## The Car

Our magnificent Aston Martin Rapide was provided by Prestige Cars. They will deliver to your home or meet you at the airport on your arrival. Their customer service is quite exemplary.

[www.prestigecarhire.co.uk](http://www.prestigecarhire.co.uk)

## Champagne

The Pol Roger cellars and the château are not open to the public. There are many public tours available in Epernay including the Mercier tour, which is full of delightful eccentricity.

[www.champagnemercier.fr](http://www.champagnemercier.fr)

## Hotels

Villa Eugene - Avenue de Champagne  
We at the beautiful classical Villa Eugene in Epernay. It's a small hotel with only 15 rooms. I suggest calling them directly to make a booking. They don't use booking web sites for all their rooms. The hotel has a small open air swimming pool and a beautiful secluded sun terrace.

[www.villa-eugene.com](http://www.villa-eugene.com)

## Château Cocove

Near the channel tunnel we stayed overnight at the perfect Château Cocove. A perfect overnight stop before a supermarket dash to top up the wines and cheese.

[www.chateaucocove.com](http://www.chateaucocove.com)

## Restaurant

We ate at Banque and Seven in Epernay. On our way back from Epernay we stopped at Le Grand Cerf in Monchenot, the meal was truly wonderful and a memorable end to our stay in Champagne.

[www.brasserie-labanque.fr](http://www.brasserie-labanque.fr)

[www.lesberceaux.com](http://www.lesberceaux.com)

[www.le-grand-cerf.fr](http://www.le-grand-cerf.fr)

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Photographs: Nic Wing and courtesy of Pol Roger.

