

RAISE A GLASS TO FRENCH WINE

From the fertile hills of the Loire Valley to the sparkling region of Champagne, France offers an unbeatable break for wine-lovers

No matter how many countries plant vines, France remains the cradle of wine culture. The fizz of champagne, the blended reds and sweet whites of Bordeaux and the tiny soil variations that you taste in a glass of pinot noir or chardonnay from Burgundy are the standards that other regions have adopted as their own. The variety is stunning: the Loire Valley alone has enough different wine styles to make most wine-producing countries jealous.

Whether you want to sample local wines at superb restaurants, wander the hills that nourish the vines or explore local museums and farmers' markets, France

is the ideal destination. Those seeking an authentic wine experience should look out for the Vignobles & Découvertes label — the national wine tourism label of France.

The two most important northern wine regions are the world-famous Champagne, with its vine-covered hills and the network of Roman-built underground cellars beneath Reims, and the Loire Valley, where vineyards dotted with graceful châteaux stretch for hundreds of miles along France's longest river. It never hurts to have a glass of fine wine to look forward to at the end of a day spent tasting and sightseeing.



72 HOURS IN CHAMPAGNE

Just two-and-a-half hours by car from Calais, Champagne is the perfect place for a weekend of fun and fizz

DAY 1 Go back in time

Begin a day in Reims with a visit to the magnificent cathedral. Keep an eye out for the stained-glass window donated by Champagne's 44 wine-producing villages — it depicts the full winemaking process, from vine-growing to Dom Pérignon, the monk credited with creating modern Champagne. Descend further into the past with a tour of the Taittinger cellars, which include Roman-era graffiti and stairs to the now-demolished Abbey of St Nicaise, as well as, of course, millions of bottles of Champagne.

For a drop of what those bottles contain, stop by Le Wine Bar by Le Vintage on Place du Forum; then, when hunger strikes, head to Doko Koko, the less formal younger sister of the Michelin-starred Racine. For accommodation, La Demeure des Sacres is a great four-room maison d'hôtes located near the cathedral. Alternatively, splash out on a stay at Domaine Les Crayères, including dinner at the fantastic two Michelin-star Le Parc, which offers an amazing wine list, including — of course! — pages of champagnes to choose from.

DAY 2 Visit West Marne Valley

The next day, head an hour west to Marne Valley, the area dotted with rows of vines, charming country villages, Romanesque bell towers and princely castles. Exciting attractions and activities here include raising a glass at Champagne Lévêque Déhan, joining a workshop based around the senses at Champagne Méteyer Père et Fils and trying your hand at an escape room game at Maison Pannier.

DAY 3 Admire the Aube region

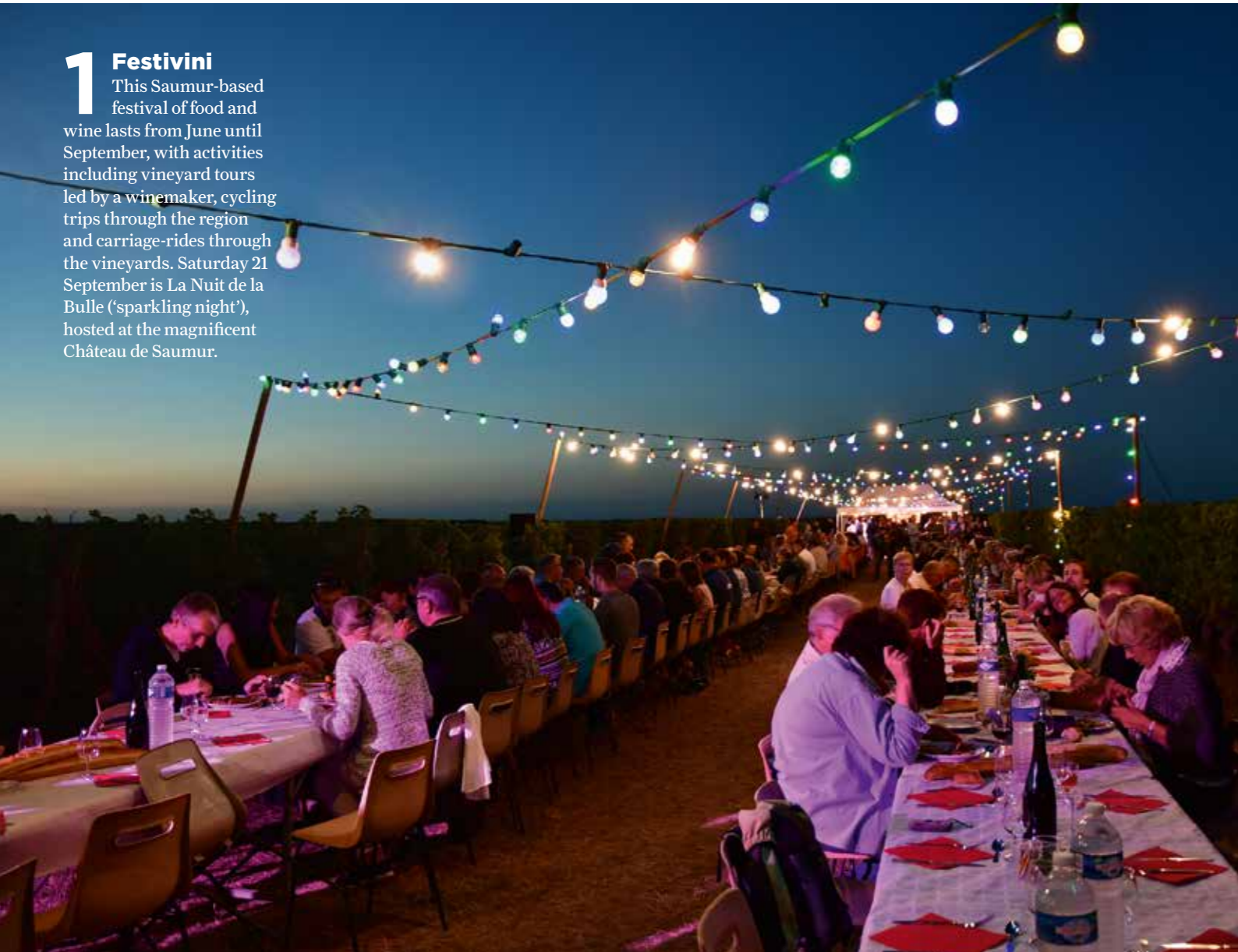
Spend the last day in the Aube region, responsible for a quarter of France's champagne. In the picturesque town of Troyes, the region's medieval capital, explore the Rachi Synagogue and the legendary Église Sainte-Madeleine. Next, head southeast to Côte des Bar, which stretches across 17,000 acres. Visit the family-owned Drappier champagne house, then sip your way through the vineyards that are almost exclusively planted with pinot noir grapes.

TOP 5 THINGS TO DO IN THE LOIRE VALLEY

This fertile valley has an astonishing array of different wine styles, ranging from Muscadet wines to Sancerre wines. Here are a few things not to miss when visiting this wine-rich pocket of France

1 Festivini

This Saumur-based festival of food and wine lasts from June until September, with activities including vineyard tours led by a winemaker, cycling trips through the region and carriage-rides through the vineyards. Saturday 21 September is La Nuit de la Bulle ('sparkling night'), hosted at the magnificent Château de Saumur.



2 Spend a night in a wine barrel

Vignobles Marchais, near Nantes, has it all: white, red and sparkling wines to sample; a friendly wine bar among the vines; and endless plates of charcuterie to stave off hunger. There are also enormous wine barrels that have been converted into standalone bedrooms.

3 Vignes Vins Rando

Seventeen organised walks will be taking place on 31 August and 1 September 2019, with winemakers guiding guests through the valley's magnificent landscapes. Try the region's most quaffable wines, from areas like Muscadet and the Touraine, as well as trying local food and exploring the area's rich heritage.

4 Wine Fair in Sancerre

Sancerre offers a fantastic mix of history and gastronomy. The famous Wine Fair of France takes place over the last weekend of August (this year, on the 24-25 of the month), featuring 30 wine producers and a range of food stands selling local delicacies. It's an event that's sure to delight the taste buds of all visitors.

5 Cycle the vineyards

There are plenty of options for cycling in the Loire, from short tootles to week-long routes taking in fine restaurants. Vineyard et Vélo is run by David and Angela, originally from Devon, who offer guided tours through the vineyards around Chinon, including picnics and — bien sûr! — wine tastings.



IMAGES: MAIREDE MONTREUIL BELLAY; HENRY WR WHITE

FIVE MINUTES WITH... LESLEY COSTICK

The head of onboard partnerships at P&O Ferries talks to us about the new Brasserie menu, how the wines on board are selected and what makes France the perfect getaway destination

What keeps your passengers coming back to France?

With so much to see and do, from the azure waters of the French Riviera to the snow-capped peaks of the Alps, not to mention the sumptuous food, it's no wonder we all flock to France. The country has everything and getting there is so easy — it's just a 90-minute journey on a P&O ferry from Dover to Calais.

Can you tell us a little bit about the new Brasserie menu?

Working in partnership with BaxterStorey, we aim to provide an innovative dining and food experience, with an emphasis on fresh, locally sourced ingredients to suit vegetarians, vegans and meat eaters. New additions to the menu include the Mediterranean platter, featuring a selection of meats, olives, pesto and sun-blushed tomatoes. Plates from the grill include steak and roast chicken served with fries. There's also an impressive beef burger, tasty pork belly with mash and fresh seafood. For dessert, there's a chocolate and coffee opera cake, a perfectly-sharp lemon tart or a delicious cheese board.

What's the wine like on board?

The wine is selected with the help of our wine experts Jackson Nugent Vintners and Master of Wines Conal Gregory to ensure a selection that perfectly complements the dishes.

What made you steer towards a more meat-free selection of dishes?

We responded to customer feedback and growing trends. The dishes create an exciting new menu for all food-lovers. Mains include a halloumi burger served in a beetroot bun and a white bean cassoulet. For vegans, there's a delicious vegan pizza topped with vegan cheese and roasted vegetables, and a linguine all'arrabiata served with hard vegan cheese, sun-blushed tomatoes and olives.

And your favourite thing on the menu?

In the Brasserie, it would have to be the roast cod, which is understated but so delicious. Everyone loves our Food Court fish and chips — even the French!

Essentials

Getting There: With up to 23 sailings a day between Dover and Calais, unbeatable onboard services and friendly staff to help out every step of the way, it's never been easier to get to France. Book your next trip today at pofferries.com.

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