

A Sparkling Trip To Bollinger

Normally, trips to wine suppliers are very hard work (no, honestly) and the preserve of our buying team, trying to find the best cuvées at the best prices. However, occasionally we are given the opportunity to take our other staff on fact-finding visits, which are great fun, if a little hectic.

In February, we took a group to visit the world-renowned Champagne house of Bollinger. Such a treasured visit demanded the most treasured staff, so we identified our 'unsung heroes' at the company's front line, who regularly go out of their way to give extra special service to our customers. Hence, at a really unsociable early hour on a cold February morning, some of our sales, accounts, warehouse and shop staff flew out to Paris to meet the people who make Bollinger.

A two-hour drive from Charles de Gaul Airport brought us to the home of Bollinger in the stylish little town of Ay, which was covered with a light dusting of snow. Ay is the most famous Grand Cru village in Champagne, located some 30km from Reims. We had an exquisite lunch at the house of Madame Lilly Bollinger, where the history and ethos of the company was explained.

Madame Lilly Bollinger is one of the most famous figures in Champagne's history. In 1918 Elizabeth Law de Lauriston Bourbers (known as Lilly) married Jacques Bollinger, head of a small but growing Champagne house. When Jacques died in 1941, Lilly took the reigns and famously traveled the world, spreading the word about Bollinger. In many respects she was a true pioneer in creating an internationally recognised brand. Lilly was also a great spokeswoman for the Champagne region as a whole, leaving several infamous quotes.

"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." Madame Lilly Bollinger, Daily Mail 17th October 1961

Today the success of Lilly's promotional endeavours is clear from the prestige and familiarity of Bollinger Champagne. However, it was a surprise to most to learn just how small their volumes are in the great scheme of things, producing just 2.1m of Champagne's total annual output of 300m bottles. They remain, in essence a small, artisan producer.

We visited the coopers' workshop, the last one in Champagne where wooden barrels are still made, repaired and restored. Seeing a workshop with such ancient tools, and complete lack of machinery indicated the depth of craftsmanship and skill that was being preserved, not for the tourists, but out of necessity. A tour of the vast chalk cellars beneath the village showed how manual the whole process is, with teams of cellar men manually racking the reserve bottles. Seeing such quantities of precious Champagne, gently maturing in the perfect conditions, was humbling. We emerged from these labyrinthine cellars into the winery, several streets away, and into a very different world of immaculate white tiles and stainless steel - the absolute epitome of hygienic, up-to-date wine-making. This was where the ancient crafts met the modern world.

It's only now that we realised that we had spent many hours, discovering the different delights, rapt with attention at the details of production and historic facts being offered. We had been transported to a different world for a day, completely removed from ours, yet the fruits of which we would enjoy by opening a bottle at home. An evening in Reims was followed by a morning flight back to reality and work. But the general impression from all was one of awe, at the passion and detail that goes into making a bottle of Champagne that we may have taken for granted before. Suddenly, the price of a bottle of Bollinger seems remarkably good value for money. So if you ever call the Aveyrs office to ask about Champagne to be met with an effusive story about how it is made, you're probably talking to one of the lucky staff who came on this trip.

You can buy Bollinger online Aveyrs Dot Com where we are currently listing the UK's best price for Bollinger Special Cuvée NV- just £25 per bottle.

About the Author

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