

You've probably never been to Champagne's Aÿ. Here's why you should



As one of the most famous wine regions in the world, [Champagne](#) is a must-visit destination for wine lovers, the wine curious, and those who simply want to escape to the French countryside to wind down for a few days, a glass of fizz in hand.

Most people make the main towns of [Épernay](#) or [Reims](#) their base for visiting the region's many champagne houses but the village of Aÿ, has a surprising amount to offer. As the birthplace of Champagne Bollinger and famed French jeweler René Lalique, it has a long and rich history, meaning there's plenty to explore over a weekend. Aÿ's excellent choice of champagne houses also gives visitors a full introduction to the world's most famous drink. Here are the best things to do in Aÿ.



1. Get to know Aÿ with a guided tour

If you want to get to know Aÿ and delve into its history then the best way to start is by booking a guided tour through the Tourist Office in Hautviller (or book [online](#)). Walks either focus on the history and architecture of Aÿ, taking in sights such as the village's typical half-timbered houses and the 15th-century Gothic-style Église Saint-Brice (Saint Brice church), or show visitors the commune's gourmet side with strolls through the vineyards before heading back into the commune to visit various shops and producers. You also pick up bottles of champagne, local cheeses, and Champagne's traditional pink biscuits, *Biscuits roses de Reims*.

Alternatively, you can find out more about the life of René Lalique, the French jeweler and master glassmaker who was born in Aÿ in 1860, by following the self-guided [Parcours Lalique](#). Follow the totems dotted around the village (with information in French and English) or grab a map from Aÿ town hall.



2. Sweep through the vineyards on an e-bike

[A la Française](#) runs excellent e-bike tours starting from three locations in Champagne: Reims, Épernay, and Mareuil-sur-Aÿ, the next commune to Aÿ. After getting kitted out with a helmet and e-bike, which will help you tackle the sloping hills around Aÿ, you'll head out with an expert guide to cycle past Champagne's UNESCO-listed vineyards, including La Côte aux Enfants (The Children's Hillside), where Bollinger grow the grapes for its prestigious champagne and red wine of the same name.

The steep hill is easily spotted thanks to its white chalky cliff, and some believe got its name as only children were nimble enough to climb up it and harvest the grapes. You'll also stop at the charming commune of Hautvillers to see [Dom Pérignon](#)'s tomb in Eglise Saint-Sindulphe (Saint-Sindulphe church), and enjoy a well-deserved champagne tasting back in Mareuil-sur-Aÿ.

3. Go tasting at the champagne houses

Founded in 1829 by the Count of Villermont, Athanase-Louis-Emmanuel Hennequin, with wine enthusiast Paul Renaudin and friend Joseph-Jacob-Placide 'Jacques' Bollinger, [Champagne Bollinger](#) is Aÿ's most famous champagne house. The company has a Royal Warrant (and the personal approval of James Bond), thanks in part to the formidable Lily Bollinger who is credited with making the champagne house what it is today. It was Lily's idea to put only 'Bollinger' on the bottle.

[Tours](#) take you down into the cellars and finish with a tasting. You also get to peek through the locked gates of Galerie 1829, Bollinger's collection of valuable vintages which date back to its inception. Book in advance.

Another champagne house with a long history, but which isn't as well-known outside of France, is [Champagne Ayala](#). Founded in 1860 by Edmond de Ayala, they produce low-dosage champagnes (where minimal sugar is added to the wine before it is sealed) that champion the purity of Chardonnay grapes (Bollinger uses Pinot Noir). Ayala pioneered (what was for the time) a dry champagne, bucking the trend for a sweet, almost syrupy style of the drink. Touring both houses in one day is a great way to compare the aromas of both.

Other houses to contact about tours include [Champagne Henri Giraud](#), [Champagne Dauby](#), [Champagne Pierre Leboeuf](#), and [Champagne Egrot & Filles](#), which are notably all headed up by women.

4. Get schooled in champagne at the Pressoria museum

Housed in the former pressing room of Champagne Pommery, [Pressoria](#) is an interactive museum that offers an accessible introduction to champagne. The idea is to learn about the winemaking process from start to finish using all five senses, including smelling different grape varieties, blending your own champagne using touchscreens, and ending the experience with a tasting to compare different types of champagne. With plenty of engaging hands-on activities, it's also fun for older kids too.



5. Pair your fizz with traditional French cuisine

Although the main culinary experience in Ay is drinking champagne, there are also a few specialties to try here, which naturally pair well with a glass of bubbles. Local cheeses to look out for include creamy Langres, velvety Vignotte, silky Cendré de Champagne, and the Brie de Meaux.

On the sweeter side, *Biscuits roses de Reims* are very dry pink biscuits ('rose' is French for pink; the name refers to the color, not flavor) which are historically served with a glass of champagne. The idea is to dip them in the bubbles before eating, though this no longer happens as much. Be warned: the texture isn't for everyone.

If you have your fill of bubbles, order a glass of Ratafia de Champagne instead. This liqueur is made with the same grapes as champagne and fortified with grape brandy to make a sweet, easy-to-drink aperitif.

How to get to Aÿ

Located 7km (4 miles) east of Épernay, in northeastern France, Aÿ is reachable by train from Paris Gare de l'Est in 90 minutes (change at Épernay). The same journey is around two hours by car. Alternatively, Reims is 20 minutes to Aÿ by train or a 35-minute drive.

Stay in one of Aÿ's historic mansions

Most of the accommodation in Aÿ are *chambre d'hôtes* (B&B). A few of these are housed in historic properties, such as the 18th-century [La Mongeardière](#), and [Villa Collery](#), which belongs to Champagne Collery and can organize champagne tastings.

For something bigger, and extra facilities such as a pool, the three-star hotel [Castel Jeanson](#). A former 19th-century mansion, it still has its original stained-glass windows and Art Nouveau glass roof.