

Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

Royal Champagne Epernay

Ideally situated between Epernay and Reims, just a few kilometers from Ay in the heart of the vineyards, the **Royal Champagne** hotel is *the* place to stay in Champagne for days of leisured touring and—of course—plenty of vintage bubbly. Once a stagecoach inn, the hotel has been recently acquired by the Baglioni Group. Judging by the heavy investment in renovations and expansions, the hotel's owners appear determined to transform it into one of France's most beautiful properties.

In the room occupied by **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors during their recent visit (one of 25 on the property), a lush green "grape" fabric covering the padded walls was echoed on tablecloth, drapes, headboard and bedspread. Double doors leading from the outer foyer into the guest bedroom kept things very quiet. The bathroom was lovely, with the best possible layout: a bathtub plus shower, with a toilet in a separate room. Super-thick towels and bathrobes only enhanced the pampered feeling. There's no air-conditioning in the rooms—something that may be noticeable on the hottest of summer days, although it wasn't a problem during our visit.

All rooms have either balcony or terrace, taking fine advantage of the panoramic views. In ours, tall sliding doors led onto a patio, while retractable electronic shutters made it easy to grab a mid-afternoon nap (something you just might feel like doing, if you've

spent the whole morning tasting at nearby champagne houses, as we did!).

In some of the newer rooms, fresh and creative design ideas are much in evidence, both in the rooms (where polished expanses of wood predominate) and in the bathrooms (where Japanese-style sliding doors in frosted glass provide access as well as privacy). There is also a large, elegant duplex suite in pale blue and yellow.



The place to stay and dine in Champagne

In the hotel's restaurant, the chairs, wallpaper and curtains are done in intricate Italianate patterns, and opulent candelabra lamps combine with large picture windows to make the setting a lovely one. We liked the choice of music: New Age, with hints of World and even Trance mixed in—a welcome, slightly daring, switch from the diet of staid classical favorites that are so often heard in other restaurants.

Chef Phillippe Augé's cuisine is impressive, with freshness, piquancy and a touch of daring. "I'm open to other culinary influences," he told us. Ingredients like garlic and thyme make frequent appearances in his dishes, with a variety of olive and nut oils creatively employed to keep things on the light side, yet without sacrificing intensity of flavor. Says the chef, "I don't have a complicated cuisine. For me, it's 60% produce, 40% savoir-faire. I try not to do too much *to* the produce."

The chef described his *escargots de Champagne et cuisses de grenouille cuisinés en cocottede fonte, quelques lardons et morilles, un jus court au persil plat* saying: “I like to work with snails and frogs legs, but I don’t want the dishes fatty,” so he cooks them in white wine. The *fricassée de homard rôti en cocotte aux artichauts poivrade* was one of the evening’s highlights: tender and rich, jazzed up with crushed garlic and thyme and flamed with Cognac and Port, to which tomatoes and fresh parsley is added.

Sorbet of rosé champagne was served before the meat course—just the kind of palate cleanser we prefer: one that’s fresh and doesn’t impart a distractingly new taste of its own. With palates revitalized, we enjoyed the *selle d’agneau en rognonade rôtie à la broche* in a finely reduced sauce.

Naturally, champagne was our beverage of choice. We had a crisp and refined 1996 *Philipponnat* “Grand Blanc.” This 100% grand cru offering displayed delicate notes of butter, white flowers and champignons de Paris along with a nice citrone finish—not a lot of structure here, though, and it wasn’t full bodied enough to support the variety of culinary flavors that were served.

We concluded our evening in the Florentine salon, made opulent by lavish fabrics and rose petals strewn on the tables—and left feeling warmly satisfied.

This article was written by Nicole Medvecky-Riggs, Contributing Editor to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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