



SOMMELIER KEITH EDGAR WRITES ABOUT A WINE TOUR ACROSS EUROPE, WITH IHIM

After years of studying, tasting and travelling, perhaps the most gratifying aspect of life as a wine professional is passing on my knowledge and enthusiasm for an industry I love. For the past four years, I have been fortunate to guide the top wine programme for students at International Institute of Hotel Management (IIHM) through several wine regions of Europe. The competition for a spot on the tour is fierce and each place is hard earned. To be considered for the competition, the student must have both high academic scores and near-perfect attendance.

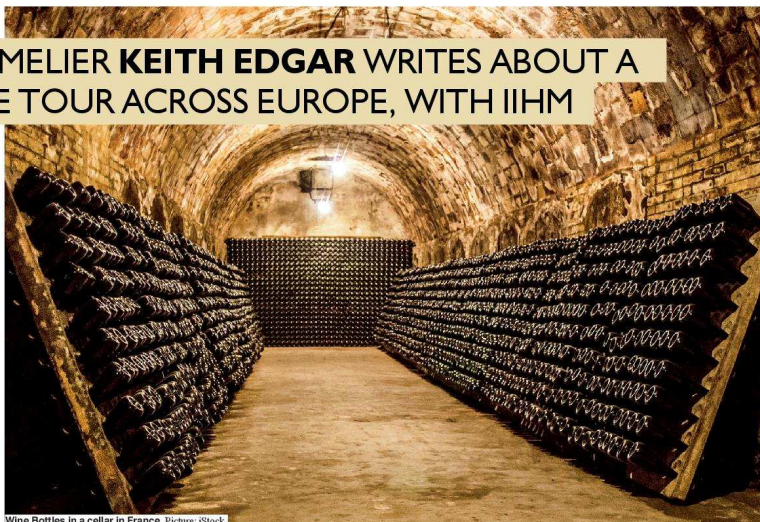
Next, they must sit for an exam, write an essay on a wine region and submit a personal essay on why they believe they should be chosen to participate. I interview the top three students from each campus and make the very difficult final decision. All of the student's expenses are covered by IIHM, so participation is completely based on merit, not the ability to pay.

The aim of this trip is for the students to absorb a level of understanding of the winemaking process and history that is difficult to absorb through lectures, analysis and tastings alone. The concept of terroir is understood through the unique experience of a place, and France is a perfect country to introduce this concept.

From the character of the soil beneath their feet and the geographical situation of the vineyards, to the intense moodiness of the mistral winds aiding and complicating harvest, to the seductive earthy smell of the first fermentation, we are able to combine classroom information with experiential knowledge that can only come through the senses. This journey ensures each participant will return home with a greater understanding of both the art and science, the process and product of viticulture.

BIODYNAMIC VITICULTURE
The 2018 IHM Wine Tour was organised around the vineyards of the Cote du Rhone and Champagne regions of France. We started in the south in Avignon, on the left bank of the Rhone. The seasonal mistral winds were high as the students were given their first vineyard tour at Domaine des Carabiniers. We were given a comprehensive introduction to biodynamic viticulture, which, all begin with the soil and a rigorous commitment to biodiversity. Bijaynee Boity, a student, was compelled to learn "how biodynamic viticulture goes much further than organic viticulture in their lack of dependence on copper and sulphur in favour of more natural preparations and their focus on plant strength and soil health".

The first tasting of the journey was at Domaine des Carabiniers. Lirac and Tavel, the students were



Wine Bottles in a cellar in France. Picture: iStock

able to weigh out this cost-benefit analysis of this style of wine production. The big surprise of the trip came early as the students were invited to participate in the last day of Mourvedre grape harvest at Domaine Grand Veneur, Chateaufort-du-Pape. They were quick to absorb what an exceptional opportunity had been extended to them as they picked up their clippers and baskets and moved toward the vines after a brief lesson by Christophe Jaume, one of the fils in Alain, Jaume & Fils, a family of wine producers in Chateaufort-du-Pape since 1826.

Before long, their initial trepidation turned into fierce competition after observing the speed and dexterity of the seasoned pickers. Student Jayson Ritchson considers himself to be extremely lucky to have been invited to participate in the last day of harvest: "This will forever be one of my most cherished memories," he said.

HOW THE ANCIENTS AGED AND STORED THEIR WINES

After a good few hours in the vines we left the field for a tour and tasting at the winery. The morning of our second day around Avignon, we drove to the limestone-rich slopes of the Dentelles de Montmirail to taste Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise in the vineyards of Domaine de Durban and Domaine des Bernardins. The students were able to taste the Muscat grape from the highly-perfumed dry wines to the fortified, sweet, Vin Doux that the region is known for. With an understanding of biodynamic viticulture, from the previous day, they were quick to understand the vineyard's commitment to the AOC's

guidelines towards sustainable agriculture, from hand-tending of the vines to the permissible dressings for the soil. Students on this tour tend to favour sweet so it was no surprise they had an instant, visceral response to the smell and taste of the honey, golden Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise, possibly the closest relationship between grape and wine they will sample.

The sense of history was palpable as we drove through the gates of Chateau de Saint Cosme, used within the halls of Cigadas. This estate, the oldest in the region, is built on the site of a Gallo-Roman villa that dates back to 1064 AD. The property has been held by the same family since 1490, seeing 15 generations of winemakers, with Louis Barroul currently at the helm. Since taking over in the early '90s, Barroul has moved his estate from the production of primarily bulk wines to world recognition for several of their wines, most notably, Cigadas.

After a tour of some of the Chateau Saint Cosme's old vines and learning about the natural way

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the vines are tended, the students descend into the cellars that are part modern, part 17th century and part Roman. Student Anika Das was impressed by what the space reflected "how the ancients aged and stored their wines". We were fortunate to have our tasting in a Roman part of the cellar that was embellished with countless artefacts from the Chateau's history, including ancient pieces uncovered at various stages of the centuries-long evolution.

VINES TO THE BARRELS TO THE MARKETPLACE

One last right and one more great meal in Avignon, then off for an early morning drive to Tain-l'Hermitage to visit Tain-l'Hermitage and to Domaine Des Freres in Tournon. At its heart, this trip is a combination of a carefully planned and hard-worked itinerary, and a string of unexpected events. It is impossible to rock up to some of the world's greatest wine producers and ask for a tour and a tasting, in most cases even the most solicitous emails will go unanswered.

The rough years of carefully-tended relationships, we are able to open doors for the students that are firmly closed to the general public and taste what a real taste of what life might be as a wine professional — from the vines to the barrels to the marketplace. They experience the scope of the community and, perhaps for the first time, are able to imagine their place in it. They are welcomed by committed professionals excited to share their passion and knowledge, they come away changed for ever.

We could not suppress our surprise and joy when one of the students spotted the Indian flag

raised at the M. Chapoutier headquarters to welcome us. For Faran Acharya "it was an honour and a pleasure to see our flag hoisted," for many, one of the most striking moments of the trip.

After a lunch of seasonal local dishes paired with a full fleet of wines, a great introduction to the region's terroir. As we were settling in, M. Michel Chapoutier graciously arrived at our table to personally welcome and greet the students. It was impossible not to be completely star-struck. For someone in the wine world, this is akin to Amitabh Bachchan dropping by your indie film set. Basking in the excitement of the lunch, and in need of a postprandial stroll, we took a short walk through the village to tour one of the Chapoutier vineyards.

Chapoutier was one of the early adopters of biodynamic vineyard management that gradually transformed the industry. From the tasting single-varietal wines to walking through a rocky, sun-warmed plot that would be harvested for a single vineyard bottling, the concept of terroir comes more into focus.

Our day finished with a tour of the Delas winery and cellar and a tasting of wines in their cellar tasting room. Days like these provide a rigorous workout for the students' palates and noses. They have the opportunity to compare and contrast wines from two companies separated only by a few kilometres and the Rhone river.

They experience how each expresses distinct character through practices in the vineyard and in the winery and make decisions on

preference through what is in front of them. The character of each quantity, and quality of wines in a single day may not recur for a long time. Our time in Cotes du Rhone came to an end at the north point in Vienne where we visited Cave Yves Cuilleron in Chavanay and Etablissements Guigal in Ampuis.

It is always tricky visiting vineyards and wineries during harvest — it is the time where there is the most activity (picking, sorting, crushing, fermentation) but it is also a time where every member of the production team is flat out busy and focused with the task at hand. We were fortunate to be welcomed inside many operations to get an up-close view of the entire process. I am always quite moved by how often the heads of many of the wineries, or head winemakers, take time away to guide the students personally or guide them through a tasting. The IHM students are recognised as a first wave of home-grown wine professionals in India and they are welcomed as potential

ambassadors for French wine as they pursue their careers.

The harvest was still arriving at the winery the morning Yves Cuilleron greeted us to guide us for an intimate trip through his operation. He has carved out a niche from a busy day but it is clear he wants to pack in as much as possible in his limited time. Like anyone consumed by their craft, M. Cuilleron was able to show us the highly technical and innovative sides of his operation while simultaneously sharing his philosophical takes on agriculture, winemaking and life — encouraging the students to go

farther and learn more. After he left, so the historic prestige of the city did not reveal itself until we walked to Champagne Henriot early in the morning for our first tasting of the day. There is something special about treading the tree-lined streets, passing by the centuries-old institutions of Champagne — a confirmation that these places exist in their brick-and-mortar manifestations.

WE ASSOCIATE CHAMPAGNE WITH CELEBRATION

Our final stop in the Rhone was the winery and cellars of the prestigious E. Guigal, considered to be one of the most important wine producers in the world. We were met at reception by Philippe Guigal, who manages the business with his father, and his wife Eve Guigal. Guigal offered to personally guide us through the bustling winery and vast cellars while expertly weaving the history of the winery with the history of the family into a compelling narrative of hard work, vision and perseverance.

As we entered a stunning tasting room, in the cellar, the students were aware that this would be the final tasting of the varied and complex wines of the Rhone Valley. Student Amar Krishna had a complete epiphany during his side-by-side tasting of a Guigal Hermitage and one of their famed Cotes Roti. He could truly comprehend how the Syrah grape could manifest differently in each wine, and he "realised how crucial the terroir plays in terms of an entire grape structure". A positive note to say goodbye to Cotes du Rhone and proceed to the Champagne ahead of us.

Students — with David Bourdaire (centre; in white shirt) at the Champagne Bourdaire Gaillois — are all smiles with bottles of champagne in their hands



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We arrived in Reims late at night, so the historic prestige of the city did not reveal itself until we walked to Champagne Henriot early in the morning for our first tasting of the day. There is something special about treading the tree-lined streets, passing by the centuries-old institutions of Champagne — a confirmation that these places exist in their brick-and-mortar manifestations.

Perhaps it's because we associate Champagne with celebration, there is an almost mythical quality to the place that is made up of all the beautiful estates of the great brands that are internationally recognisable. We organised this part of the trip around three of the large, recognisable brands — Champagne Henriot, Champagne Pommery, G.H. Mumm, and a smaller, independent producer Champagne Bourdaire Gaillois. The large houses offer tours of their massive cellars that are as impressive as they are functional.

By the end of the tours, second fermentation, ageing on the lees, riddling, disgorging and dosage were indelibly imprinted on the student's mind and they were able to taste the difference of expression from house to house.

Champagne Henriot provided a superb overview of the geography, geology and history of the region as well as an in-depth discussion of the Champagne process and a comprehensive tasting. Because there were women central to some of the great houses, the history of the estates, and the history of their struggles, were particularly inspiring to the females on the tour. Student Jayana Ghale said she "still cherishes the day when we visited the Pommery Champagne House. I felt really lucky to witness the elegance and power of Pommery. I was inspired by the history and fascinated by the cellar."

The final day in Reims, and the final tasting of the tour, was at Champagne Bourdaire Gaillois just outside of Reims in Pouillon. It is impossible to walk away from a session with David Bourdaire without a deep understanding of the every factor that goes into producing and enjoying a bottle of Champagne.

From providing samples of wet earth to smell (to understand minerality and terroir) to offering a variety of glasses to understand how glass shape affects the bouquet (this was a class of sights, sounds, smell and taste).

M. Bourdaire encouraged the students to open all of the bottles themselves, with a little initial coaching from me. Aritra Paul's nose and palate were the most accurate in the room. Bourdaire Gaillois when he opened his first Champagne bottle. He recalls: "I was touched by M. Bourdaire's expression of warm hospitality and generosity. Although I had read about disgorging in my books and heard about it on the tour, to witness M. Bourdaire perform it for us is something I will never forget." We left the estate with solid memories and a bottle of Champagne to bring home.

The author is the director of wine education at IHIM
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