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THE 100 BEST NON-VINTAGE

My Home Abroad



Hôtel de la Paix

Text: Essi Avellan MW / Photo: Pekka Nuikki



One would expect that Reims, the champagne capital, would be bursting with champagne bars, but that, surprisingly, is not the case. When I mentioned this deficit to a local during a visit in 2005, I was pointed to the first and only champagne bar in town, the bar at Hôtel de la Paix. At the time it was still brand new, having only recently been launched, and it appealed to me at first sight. Since then, the hotel and its bar have become my home abroad.

Hôtel de la Paix



My Home Abroad

I still remember entering the bar for the first time. Hôtel de la Paix is situated in the very core of Reims, its entrance being right off the main pedestrian street, Place Drouet d'Erlon. The stylish stone building was inviting, as was the modern and spacious lobby, with red carpet ushering the way in. Continuing from the lobby, a wide, glass-walled hallway led to the bar.

The bar, which resembled a comfortable and chic living room, was empty but gorgeous. Bright, brave colours and simplistic lines, all brought together by dark wood. Plenty of character, but the overall effect was still surprisingly soothing.

I became excited when I spotted a gigantic champagne cooler - over a metre wide - filled with champagne bottles of different sizes. Finally, a proper champagne bar. I remember thinking and bravely entered, even though I was the only client.

I took a seat by the bar and started to study the champagne list. Despite it fitting onto one A4 page, I was pleased with what I saw: some 50 champagnes, mainly from Grande Marques, at reasonable prices. Just the place I had been looking for, I thought, and I ordered a glass of champagne from the bartender, whose name tag read Erol.

I started sipping my champagne, but felt slightly uncomfortable in the empty bar. But suddenly the entertainment was on the house, as Erol started to throw - or flair - bottles in the air, demonstrating skill that made Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* look like a rookie. The more impressed I looked, the more demanding the flairing became. People passing by the hotel lobby started to enter to enjoy the show. All of a sudden, the bar was buzzing with life - and I had to order another glass of champagne just to figure out this stunningly remarkable place that I had just discovered.



Champagnes and Cocktails

Now, nearly four years later, I sit again in the bar, which has not changed much, other than in popularity. It has become the place to enjoy a drink in town and it gathers together the hotel residents, wine industry people and the locals. As I recount my first experience to the hotel owner Antoine Renardias, he comments with some nostalgia in his voice:

"Those were the very early days of the new bar. I needed a Chief Bartender here who could entertain. Erol Özdemir had just arrived in Reims from Turkey to be with his girlfriend. He spoke no French but he could flair like no one else. He had a 20-year career as a flaring bartender in Turkey. In fact, last year he competed in France for the first time and finished among the top 10 finalists in the national championships!"

So, is de la Paix more of a champagne bar or a cocktail bar, I enquire.

"It is a combination of both. The tourists and the wine trade drink champagne, but the trendy Reims youth loves our cocktails. We have by far the best cocktail culture in town. Because of Erol's knowledge, we can do virtually any cocktail, not just the classics."

Why I love the bar has a lot to do with the combination of local people and international guests. This is the bar where everybody meets for the pre-dinner aperitif. And this is where they all return for the nightcap. But it is especially on Fridays and Saturdays that the bar becomes the pulse of Reims, when the local youth fill the bar.

The One and Only

What brought me here in the first place was champagne, so I wanted to ask Antoine Renardias more about the champagne bar concept. Firstly, however, I needed

confirmation that this really was the only champagne bar in the city of Reims, which boast a population of 250,000.

"It is the one and only. The reason must be that there is a bottle of champagne in every fridge in Reims. Champagne is such an essential part of our life that a special bar is not needed. I drink champagne every day and one can get champagne by the glass in every single café, restaurant and bar in town."

It must be difficult to limit your range of champagne to 40-50 with so many champagne houses bringing their clients here?

"It is difficult, but I try to keep the list to one page. I choose the wines personally but the bar staff alter the bottles we have by the glass. The selection varies day by day, based on our clientele. But there is a long history of working with the champagne houses. It started already with my father and grandfather, who created the co-operation."

Family History

I have been a frequent resident in the hotel over the past four years but it was only now I discovered the charming family roots it has. Antoine, who belongs to the fourth generation, tells me about the beginnings:

"My great-grandfather Victor Renardias left his home in Clermont-Ferrand to go to Paris. Destiny made him take a break at the Café du Progrès in Reims. After an hour's conversation with the owner, who was looking to sell, he decided to take over the business and to settle in Reims with his wife and five children."

Champagne has been a war zone many times, but it was during the First World War

that the city was totally destroyed by the Germans. The Notre Dame Cathedral was ravaged and only about thirty inhabitable houses remained standing. Café du Progrès, too, vanished. The sizeable restorations following the war turned Reims into an Art Déco city and the Renardias family built a new establishment, naming it Hôtel-Restaurant de la Paix. Antoine continues with the history:

"The first extension of the hotel took place in 1973 when the hotel grew from 41 rooms to 99, thanks to a new building erected on Place Burette."

Antoine himself, born in 1970, virtually grew up in this hotel, having started working here at the age of 15. He completed his

studies at EHL, the Lausanne School of Hotel Management, and joined his father Jacques and his uncle Michel at de la Paix in 1999. Soon after, a dream opportunity was given to Antoine when he had the chance to turn the traditional Hôtel de la Paix into a stylish modern hotel.

Complete Makeover

A new page in the history of the Hôtel de la Paix was turned at the beginning of the new millennium, when Jacques and Antoine Renardias approached two local creative artists to begin a complete renovation of the hotel. Antoine Renardias explains his idea behind the project:

"We needed to bring this place into the 21st century. I travel extensively and this is the style of hotel I prefer. A cosy, international style hotel, with a local spirit and friendly staff. We turned to a Reims-based architect Jacques Bléhaut, who pictured Hôtel de la Paix as a conjugation of our past and the future. At the same time we added an important extension of 80 rooms, making it a total of 169 rooms."

A hall on two levels, wide galleries, conference rooms, an auditorium, a terrace and a covered swimming pool are organised around a formal central garden. The setting has a presence such as if it were made of fragments of an 18th or 19th Century chapel and it reminds the residents that the hotel is established in the historical centre of Reims.

"The interior designer, another Champenois, Martine Poulet, specialises in equipping department stores and boutiques. Her work at our hotel consists of a synthesis of her past experiences. Her style is contemporary with a touch of 'chic' classicism. The focus is on space, comfort and lighting. Most furniture was also designed by her and manufactured by a well-known name in French furniture, Ligne Roset."

Some of the pieces by Ligne Roset have since become collectables. Such as the 'Facett' armchair by Roland and Erwan Boroullec, which was first designed for the reception of Hôtel de la Paix, but is now presented at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris. It was again artists from Reims, Jean Bigot and Jean-Pierre Touchet, who added the final touches, by painting all the artworks for the Hôtel de la Paix.



Antoine Renardias

More to Come?

The Hôtel de la Paix renovations started in 2003 and have only recently been completed, with the entire hotel now reflecting Renardias' vision. The generations of the Renardias family have caringly expanded and modernised the hotel during recent times. But, I ask of Antoine, are there still more expansions to come?

"It has been under renovation virtually since the day I started over 10 years ago. So nothing major is being planned for a little while. However, that small house at the end of the courtyard also belongs to us. I do have a dream to turn that into a spa one day..."

Knowing Antoine, I am sure we will get to enjoy the spa sooner rather than later. Even if there are numerous great hotels in the area, it is Hôtel de la Paix where I feel most at home. It has all I need for a pleasant stay: a central location, an easy-going, warm and spacious atmosphere, with a lively buzz of local and foreign clientele. And great bubbles.



Accommodation:
168 rooms from 110 to 205 €/night
(Traditional, Privilège, Deluxe)
1 Suite (75 m²) 350 €/night

Bar:
Open 7 days a week from 4 pm

Relaxation area:
Reserved exclusively for the hotel guests: heated and covered swimming pool, jacuzzi, hammam, solarium, fitness room

Business area:
Amphitheatre with seating capacity for 200
Nine meeting rooms with capacities from 10 to 80 people

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