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## Anson on Thursday: A wine cellar for Paris



Jane Anson



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**Jane Anson gets a rare glimpse of vast underground caverns on the outskirts of Paris, where a disused chalk quarry has emerged as a communal wine cellar for collectors across the French capital.**

Most French households have a pot of Blanc de Meudon somewhere in their kitchen cupboards.

One particularly well known brand sees the white powder housed within a clear plastic jar, a faux-1950s label displaying a woman in a green cocktail dress and tiny white apron promising that 'the fabulous blanc de Meudon' cleans and polishes without scratches.

- **See also: French drop tradition for private wine storage, says cellar owner**

Blanc de Meudon is also a particularly hard form of chalk found in a small enclave to the southwest of Paris in the commune of Meudon and its neighbour **Issy-les-Moulineaux**.

The chalk was extracted from quarries here from the 18th century until the early 1900s. Some of it was used to make chalk for schools (partly why we think of it as being such a brittle material, although here it is mixed with clay to soften it) as well as being used as an ingredient in paints and cosmetics.

Once the chemical industry replaced the need for chalk in industrial uses, the cellars became by turns breeding grounds for the prized Champignons de Paris mushrooms, a store room for casks of beer, with a brief cameo during World War II as ammunition storage for German forces (although rather ironically a separate chalk cellar in the same area provided an air-raid shelter for employees of the local Renault factory).

They have been classified as a site of particular scientific interest since 1986 and those in Meudon are preserved in most cases as a living museum.

Round the corner in Issy-les-Moulineaux, however, the former quarries have taken on a different and rather distinctive purpose; as private wine cellars for collectors. The first of these, Les Chemins des Vignes, open since 1912 as a wine shop, began storing wine in its underground cellars 30 years ago.

It is owned by Yves Legrand, one branch of the family that ran the rather wonderful Legrand Filles & Fils wine shop and bar on rue de la Banque in central Paris until 2000 (now majority owned by Japanese group Nakashimoto). The welcoming suburban outpost has remained in family hands and has its own vineyard, wine shop and restaurant alongside the storage facilities.

Neighbouring quarries were turned into Les Crayères de Montquartiers in 1997, and a few months ago, a third opened called Les Chais de France. Wine had been stored at Les Chais de France since the 1960s but originally by a consortium of Bordeaux négociants and regional wine producers looking for a base near Paris. It has now been remade into the most recent, and most extensive – 4,500m<sup>2</sup> of cellars, running over 2km in length – of the Issy wine cellars.

I headed over there last week to explore an area that I had long read about but never visited. At first glance, Issy-les-Moulineaux is a rather morose outer suburb. A viaduct still carries the railway that was once the royal coach route from Versailles to the Quai d'Orsay transporting the Kings of France from their summer palace to the Louvre.

Flashes of a cultural past exist with the Rodin museum in the Villa des Brillants that was used as a studio and artist's residence, but Issy itself existed as a drab site for big industry, best known for Citroën and Renault car factories. In recent years, long-term mayor André Santini (himself a huge wine lover) has attracted media companies such as Microsoft France, Eurosport and Canal+ to make Issy the site of the largest cluster of telecommunications and media businesses in France.

New housing developments are springing up, and wine bars and restaurants are opening under the railway arches. Alongside this sits perfectly Issy's growing vocation as Paris' wine cellar.

Much as with the Legrands two doors down, Les Chais de France is a family business. I was greeted by Guillaume de la Porte, the eldest of two brothers working full time on the project.

We headed up to a non-descript office high above the quarries with a view over the railway viaduct and a faint hint of the Seine beyond and acclimatised by studying the Atlas des Carrières Souterrain map that details the incredible network of underground quarries that lay beneath our feet. Alongside us, armed with countless examples of the history of the mines, were his brother Arnaud, their father Jean and uncle Alain.



Underground cellars owned by iCave at Issy-Les-Moulineaux, a former chalk quarry south of Paris.  
Source: Thomas Samson / Getty / AFP

The elder brothers own the land and bought the wine business (or rather its name) from the consortium of négociants a few decades ago but rented the space to succession of different businesses until Guillaume and Arnaud convinced them to join the clear vocation of the area and create a wine storage business for themselves.

It seems a smart decision. Between the three storage cellars of Issy, there is capacity for around 2 million bottles of wine to be kept in vast vaulted cellars that sit between 20 and 30 metres underground, giving constant 12°C temperature and 75% humidity ('we can thank the Germans for their excellent ventilation', says Alain with a smile).

But while both Les Chemins des Vignes and Les Crayères de Montquartiers work with professional clients including restaurants, hotels and auction houses such as Drouot, the new business is for private clients only – with the potential for some wine estates to use them for offering tastings and access for key collectors (they wouldn't tell me who, but said they were in talks with several 'leading' Bordeaux chateaux, and it certainly fits in with the generally accepted idea that chateaux are looking to get more direct relationships going with wine lovers).

We head down to the cellars, with the temperature on this hot summer day instantly dropping a good 15 degrees. The vaults are laid out in a series of small cells each one with vaulted ceilings rising up to 6 metres high, supported by vast columns.

At capacity, they estimate 600,000 bottles or more can be stored here, but right now are at the very beginning of their ambitions – just one 60m<sup>2</sup> room contains a series of wire boxes with both wooden cases and racks of individual bottles (each one allows between 400 and 550 bottles depending on if they are stored in or out of their cases; a perfect sign that the business is serious about attracting individual and not just institutional collectors, as is the bar and entertaining space that sits near the entrance).

Each 'cell' has motion detectors and cameras, and access is through only one door controlled by electronic badges linked to specific clients.

'We expect it to take a full five to ten years before we fill the space,' Guillaume tells me, aware that pretty much everywhere we walk resembles an empty underground empty cathedral rather than a wine storage facility.

'But we should have reached 700m<sup>2</sup> of storage by the end of the year, and eventually we will have 2,500m<sup>2</sup> equipped for wine and almost the same again for bar and club space'.

'The French don't have the same habits historically as the English do of storing their wine in professional cellars,' his father continues.

'But as wine has become more expensive, correct storage has become something that even normal wine lovers think about – it's a further insurance policy to safeguard wine over the long term. This method of storage is becoming the norm, and we are lucky to be right at the epicenter of its natural home in Paris'.