



LAND OF PLENTY

North America's most intriguing food and wine destination isn't Napa or Oregon's Willamette Valley; it's south of the border in Mexico.

By Casey Hatfield-Chiotti

Just under two hours southeast of San Diego and 20 minutes from the port city of Ensenada, Baja California's dry and sun-drenched Valle de Guadalupe has been gaining gastronomic credibility for decades. Food writers and intrepid travelers began making the pilgrimage to the Mexican wine region drawn by whispers of excellent restaurants and high-quality wineries in the early 2000s. That steady smolder has now ignited into a full Guadalupe gastronomy scene with more than 150 wineries and 70 restaurants, many opened by Latin America's most respected chefs. Today, travelers who journey on their own or go with an operator such as Baja Winery Tours (bajawinerytours.com) are rewarded with limited-release wines, tasty olive oil, remarkable aged cheeses and some of the most creative contemporary architecture in the New World.

Eat: The valley's most revelatory new restaurant opened in June 2017 on the property of Bruma

(bruma.mx), a stunning estate with a luxury bed and breakfast, winery and tasting room. Chef David Castro Hussong worked in some of the world's most illustrious kitchens, including Noma in Copenhagen and Eleven Madison Park, before being enticed to helm a concept close to his hometown. His family owns the legendary Hussong's Cantina in Ensenada. At Fauna, meals at a large communal table made of reclaimed wood take on the feel of a dinner party with dishes such as shredded lamb and butternut squash lacquered in salsa negra.

The most atmospheric Valle de Guadalupe restaurant may still be Deckman's en el Mogor (deckmans.com), where wooden tables and chairs sit beneath twinkling lights surrounded by vineyards (a new semi-enclosed dining area provides some protection from the elements). In the outdoor kitchen, chef Drew Deckman, who earned a Michelin star while working at Restaurant Vitus in Germany, grills succulent local quail and a mouthwatering ribeye. His more recent endeavor, Conchas de Piedra





(conchasedepiedra.com), opened in 2016 on the Casa de Piedra winery property. It's a Baja-style Champagne and oyster bar, and diners sit beneath a wooden trellis strung with filament bulbs while digging into sweet local clam ceviche and briny Kumiai oysters alongside glasses of méthode champenoise Espuma de Piedra blanc de blancs by Hugo d'Acosta, one of the valley's most esteemed winemakers. Visit its year-old tasting room to sample the winery's sparkling rosé and blanc de noir.

Explore: Victor Torres Alegre is making some of the most-buzzed-about wines in Valle de Guadalupe. At his industrial chic winery, Vinicola Torres Alegre y Familia, visitors taste on a roof-level terrace offering spectacular views of the vineyards. Wines range from the easy-drinking 2012 Torre Alegre Del Viko, a red blend, to the 2013 Cru Garage Nebbiolo priced at over \$100 a bottle.

While the family-owned Bodegas F. Rubio winery tasting room (bodegasfrubio.com) lacks some of the panache of other area wineries, its wines and excellent bistro, which serves local cheeses and charcuterie, make it a must. The 2014 Reserva is an elegant blend of cabernet, merlot and malbec and the Herencia Blanco, a palomino and chenin blanc blend, is the most quaffable white wine in the valley.

Camillo Magoni, a seasoned Valle de Guadalupe winemaker who spent nearly 50 years working as the head winemaker at L.A. Cetto, opened a new tasting room in 2017. Wines include a chardonnay-vermentino and a Bordeaux-inspired merlot and malbec blend. Bodegas Magoni's (casamagoni.com) mission extra virgin olive oil, made with a variety planted by Franciscan monks, and 18-year-old balsamic vinegar make excellent souvenirs.

In a valley dotted with stunning contemporary tasting rooms, Bruma's room, designed by Alejandro d'Acosta, earns points for its impressive use of reclaimed materials. A 300-year-old oak tree trunk soars through the middle of the barrel room and through the ceiling. Tree branches spring from a shallow pool on the rooftop, a stunning art piece that's best enjoyed from the private tasting room. To further entice sustainably minded travelers, there's even a Tesla charging station outside.

Stay: Bruma's Casa 8 brought refined lodging to the valley with its vanishing-edge swimming pool and chic guest rooms (from \$250) when it opened in 2015. Its hillside villas with kitchens and private terraces with plunge pools will be the most luxurious accommodations in the valley when they open later this spring.

Campera Hotel Burbuja (rooms from \$180, camperahotel.com) offers stays exclusively in "bubbles" that were designed in France to withstand the elements, and feature canopy beds and vineyard views. Encuentro Guadalupe (grupoencuentro.com.mx) was inspired by an upscale camp, but its five-bedroom Eco Villa (from \$2,700) is more luxurious than rustic, with multiple terraces and a glass-encased living room with an indoor fireplace and midcentury-modern furnishings.

If you'd prefer an old-world feel, the six-bedroom La Villa del Valle (lavilladelvalle.com) transports guests to Tuscany with its graceful Mediterranean architecture and olive groves. Guests stroll to the award-winning restaurant, Corazón de Tierra, at the property's Instagram-worthy winery made of upturned boat hulls. With its reclamation aesthetic and perfectly progressive cuisine, it's a bit like the Guadalupe Valley itself. ■



From top left: Encuentro's spare, elegant lofts dot the hillside; a living room in La Villa del Valle, overlooking 70 acres of rolling vineyard hills; bottles of sauvignon blanc, rosado and claret from Vena Cava. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The transporting Villa del Valle; Encuentro Guadalupe's stunning, five-bedroom Eco Villa; the winery at Bruma.