

PinotFile[©]

Beyond Cerveza— Baja Wine Country Special Edition

This is a highly collectable and landmark edition of the *PinotFile* for the focus of this issue is on Mexican wine and not Pinot Noir. Why would I attempt such a wild departure by featuring a land that grows no Pinot Noir? (Noted winemaker Hugo d'Acosta tells me there are some places at higher elevations that might be very suitable for Pinot Noir, but that's another story) The reason is, I recently visited the Guadalupe Valley region of Baja, the heart of the emerging Mexican wine industry, and came away with many surprising impressions that any wine lover (even a dedicated pinotophile) would enjoy.

Mexico is actually the oldest (450 years) wine-producing country in the Americas. But because of Mexico's economy and governmental restrictions and the emphasis on brandy production, the quality of the wines was lacking. Beer and tequila were the drinks of choice of Mexicans. Since the early 80's, however, there has been a renewed interest in quality wine production. Old winegrowing estates and vineyards have been revived, superior grape varieties have been planted, modern wine production techniques have been adopted, and an influx of well-trained winemakers and growers has emerged. The result is that some Mexican wines approach world-class status and the wines are getting better and better. I was surprised to experience the quality and variety of Mexican wine.

The wines here are unique in that they have a distinct expression of varietal character. This makes the wines of interest, since they depart from the sameness found in so many other wine regions. The wines show a mixed national influence from Italians, Europeans, and Russians who settled here in Baja. In addition, most of the wines are blends of two or more grape varieties: ie Cabernet Sauvignon and Tempranillo, Syrah and Grenache. Chenin Blanc and Colombard. These creative blends have a character and uniqueness that adapts well to the local cuisine and creates interest among wine enthusiasts.

The majority of the wines in Mexico are produced in the Guadalupe Valley in northern Baja, about 15 miles northeast of Ensenada on the Tecate Highway (Mexico Highway 3). The climate is Mediterranean similar to that of California's Santa Ynez Valley, with ocean breezes providing cool mornings and evenings. Rainfall is low, about 7-9 inches per year so that irrigated vineyards must tap into underground rivers. Many vineyards

Mexico— The Next Hot New Wine Country?

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"Nobody believes Mexico can produce such wine, but we know and believe it. It's like a treasure island."

Bodegas de Santa Tomas winemaker Christoph Gartner

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For more information on Baja wines consult:

Wines of Baja California, by Ralph Amey (a very detailed look at the history of Mexican wine, with detailed winery, lodging, and restaurant information)

The Wines of Mexico, Roots, Shoots, and Fruits, by Carla Faesler and Rocio Ceron and beautiful photography by Michael Calderwood. Available only at Adobe Guadalupe.

are dry farmed. A wide range of varietals are planted, including Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Uni Blanc, Colombar, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, Barbera, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignane, Grenache, Merlot, Nebbiolo, Petite Sirah, Syrah, Tempranillo, Zinfandel, and the other Bordeaux red varietals. Although the thrust of wine style in the past has been toward the classic Bordeaux model (many of the winemakers have been French-trained), it would seem that future success lies more with the Rhone type varietals.

The Guadalupe Valley runs parallel to the Pacific Ocean and is two-thirds the size of Napa Valley. 8,600 acres are dedicated to table wine production in the Valley. Unlike Napa, which attracts 4.5 million visitors a year, the Guadalupe Valley attracts only a few dozen people from Ensenada and San Diego on a busy weekend. But the adventure, which has long disappeared from California wine regions is alive here. Once you leave Highway 3 to visit the wineries, the roads all become dirt, many with dips and potholes not suitable for the family sedan. This is very rural country, similar to Napa Valley 40 years ago.

There are twelve wineries in Baja, California, nine of which are special. The largest, L.A. Cetto (Mexico's Gallo equivalent) produces 900,000 cases annually. Each winery has a colorful history to tell and I relate some background on the six that our intrepid group visited recently.

Adobe Guadalupe

Donald Miller, a successful Orange County, California banker, and his Dutch linguist wife Tru, had a dream that has been fulfilled in this Inn and Winery that exudes an aura of serenity and spiritual peace. Tru's son, Arlo, was fascinated throughout his life with certain aspects of Mexican culture, from vineyards and serapes to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The young man died tragically in an automobile accident. On a trip to Paris after Arlo's death, his mother, Tru, believed that she had received a special sign during a visit to Notre Dame. Just inside the doorway of the cathedral, she saw an anomalous Mexican chair with a serape draped over it. It was seemingly out of place and this image stayed with her— the first seed of the Adobe had started to grow. Two year's later, Tru and Donald returned to Paris, in search of a place to lay Arlo's ashes to rest along with Tru's father's. She returned to Notre Dame and found that not only were the Mexican chair and serape still there, but they were now part of a side altar— dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. At that moment, the call of the Adobe was finally heard and Tru had a clear vision that she would end her days in Mexico. All of these synchronistic "proofs of Grace" came together when Tru and Donald were researching the origins of a Mexican wine from the Valley of Guadalupe. They ventured to the Valley and to the site that one day would be the Adobe. As fate would have it, the dedication date on the deed for the property they purchased there was the very day of her son's death.



The Adobe Guadalupe Inn and Winery is a pioneering venture in a beautiful Valley filled with promise. The Millers have built a stunning Mediterranean hacienda with an adjacent working winery, 50 acres of surrounding vineyards planted to eleven varietals, a large horse stable and horseshow rink, and six rooms for lucky guests. Gourmet meals are served at the Inn. Donald, along with vineyard manager Ingeniero Fernandez (also vineyard manager at Monte Xanic) and winemaker Hugo d'Acosta, is making the best wine in Mexico. The vineyards were planted in 1998, and the first small harvest was in 2000. Three wines are produced (named after angels): Kerubiel, a blend of Syrah and Grenache, Serafiel, a blend of Cabernet and Syrah, and Gabriel, a blend of Merlot and Cabernet. The wines are all crafted very well and each is a unique expression of the terroir. Ultimate production is a projected 5,000 cases. The wine is not currently distributed in the United States.

Donald and Tru are very gracious hosts who are interested in developing the image of the Guadalupe Valley. They do not advertise, however, and still find their Inn booked on weekends for six months. This is a spectacular site for weddings and other similar events. They are not elitists, and have welcomed the Mexican community with horse shows and social events that play host to several hundred people. For more information, visit the website at www.adobeguadalupe.com

Casa de Piedra

This small boutique winery is new, but designed to look like a stone house as the winery name implies. Actually the winery did start out as the owner's house, but developed into a working winery, forcing him and his family to build a neighboring home. The owner and winemaker is Hugo D'Acosta, formerly of Bodegas de Santo Tomas. Hugo is a very talented and creative winemaker, shy and softspoken. He was trained in France and in California under Tony Soter. In 1988 he joined Bodegas de Santo Tomas in the Valley of Santo Tomas. He modernized the winery, slashed production to improve quality, and introduced modern winemaking techniques. He left to start his own winery in a cooler portion of the Guadalupe Valley. He produces two wines in limited quantities: 200 cases of an estate Chardonnay, Piedra de Sol, which is vinified without oak in the Chablis style— the best Chardonnay in Mexico by far, and 1,200 cases of Vino de Piedra, a blend of Cabernet and Tempranillo (purchased grapes). The Vino de Piedra is totally unique by virtue of its unusual blend and is a very different drinking experience. The wines sell for \$50 each in Mexico. Hugo also consults with many other wineries in the Valley and is trying to revive neglected vineyards in Baja. Under his second label, Acrata, he produces three reds and two whites from these old vines. A blend of Grenache and Petite Sirah we tasted was very appealing for its soft, pure fruit and excellent balance.



Chateau Camou

This ultra-modern gravity-flow winery was founded in 1995 by Ernesto Alveraz-Murphy. The winemaker, Bordeaux-trained Dr. Victor Torres Alegre, was one of the fathers of the Mexican wine renaissance. The California mission-style winery is perched on a small hill surrounded by 75 acres of very old-vine vineyards. Current production is 30,000 cases annually. The centerpiece wine is a Bordeaux blend. We tasted some other interesting wines, including a terrific dessert wine blend of Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, and Sauvignon Blanc, and an old-vine Zinfandel with a small amount of residual sugar. Like most wineries in Mexico, there is literally no signs of marketing, and the tasting room is a cubby-hole at the end of a hallway. Wine purchases are bagged and no receipts are offered.

Allied Domecq Mexico

This is Mexico's second largest winery and very proud of its modern technology. 1,200 acres are farmed from four of Baja's grape-growing regions. A charming young Chilean winemaker, Jose Luis Duran, showed us around the beautiful and impressive winery and its wine cellar "Las Misiones". Fermentation tanks that can hold up to 100,000 liters each dwarfed our group as we stretched necks upward. We barrel tasted numerous wines which varied in quality, but for the most part they had rich aromas and appealing flavors. The Nebbiolo really impressed me. The winery depends on the collaboration of an international group of winemakers (Allied also owns Clos du Bois and Callaway in California). Besides L.A. Cetto, this is the only winery that actually had a large, comfortable tasting room, even some wine-related items for sale.

Monte Xanic

This modern winery was founded by five Ensenada business families. Hans Beckhoff, one of the pioneers of modern Mexican wine, has been the manager and winemaker since its opening in 1987. The winery name comes from Monte, Spanish for mountain, and Xanic, an indigenous word meaning "the flower that blooms after the first rain of Spring". From the first bottling in 1988, all wine has been estate grown and bottled. 30,000 cases a year are produced from 130 acres. Equipment is modern here, including a rotary fermentor used for color extraction, a rare piece of technology in the Valley. The winery started with Bordeaux varietals and still makes intense, well-oaked Bordeaux varietal blends under its Monte Xanic label. A reserve bottling, Gran Ricardo, is made as a homage to one of the founders— Richard Hojel. The 2000 release is made from the finest grapes on the estate and spends two years in French oak, and four years in magnum bottles before release (price is \$150 per magnum). Chenin Blanc has been tried here; lately interest is directed at syrah. The winery also releases a line of younger, fruitier, and more affordable wines under the Calixa label.

L.A. Cetto

Mexico's largest winery was founded in 1926 by Italian immigrant Don Angelo Cetto. His son, Don Luis Cetto owns and manages the winery. 2,000 acres of vineyards are farmed by winemaker Carrillo Magoni. In addition to varietal wines, Cetto makes sparkling wine, brandy, and tequila. It was quite a scene at the winery on a Saturday morning when we stopped on our trip home. Several buses were in the parking lot, and hoards of adults and children were mingling, both Mexican and American. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. This is the one winery in the Guadalupe Valley with picnic areas, and food for sale. The scene in the tasting room was a riot, with people three deep belled up to the bar throwing down shots of tequila and sipping wine while young children ran around in their attractive Mexican dress. Because of our connection with Donald Miller of Adobe Guadalupe, we were allowed to go up the hill behind the winery to the Terrace. Here there is a gorgeous 360 degree view of the Valley. An adjacent bullfighting ring and a large social pavilion completed the scene. In our excitement in taking photographs of the breathtaking scenery, one woman in our party (hereafter named the "Bimbo") sat her purse down (her husband's wallet was also inside) and we left it unknowingly behind. When we reached Tecate, one hour later, she realized she had left her purse behind. We contacted the winery and they told us they had found it— we arranged for Donald Miller to pick it up. But the reason I relate this story is that the person who found it was none other than Don Luis Cetto, the owner, who had made one of his infrequent trips to the Terrace to oversee some construction in the vicinity. Needless to say, the purse, wallet, and all contents were safely returned!



A visit to the Guadalupe Valley can be a pleasant 3 day holiday for those adventurous in spirit. The drive is a comfortable 4 hours from Southern California. You must traverse a four mile dirt road to reach the Adobe Guadalupe Inn. If you are a horse person, you can horseback ride to several wineries— how cool is that? Ensenada is only a 25 minute drive away. A nearby restaurant, Laja, serves terrific Mediterranean inspired cuisine, just as inspired and in a setting that could rival any in California winecountry. The wine list is all Mexican with every top producer's wines available. Mexican wine is not cheap (the government imposes a 25% producers tax and 10% sales tax on each bottle), but not unreasonable either. You are allowed to bring back 1 liter of wine per person into the States, but our group of two cars brought back nearly two cases without difficulty (at the Tecate border, say no when they ask you if you are bringing anything back).

The renowned Doctor Emile Peynaud, Chair of Oenology at the University of Bordeaux, France, visited the region, and although skeptical beforehand, after the visit he declared: "If there are grapevines in paradise, they must be like those of the Guadalupe Valley".