



BAA TEST KITCHEN: NAPI ILLUSTRATION: AMIRA MARTIN



Hidden Valley

Say 'cheers' to the world's next great wine region: Baja California

BY MATT ALDERTON

Mexico knows how to quench a thirst. Whether you're parched on a beach in Cancún, dehydrated on a dance floor in Cabo San Lucas or toasting clients at a business dinner in Mexico City, your cup never need run dry. That is, as long as you're drinking one of its beloved national beverages: cerveza or tequila. If you prefer wine, you could be *sin suerte* — out of luck.

At least, that's how it used to be. But things are changing thanks to Valle de Guadalupe, a burgeoning wine region in Baja California.

Rick Bayless has seen the transformation firsthand. "When I first traveled through Mexico's wine country about 40 years ago, very little existed," says Bayless, a celebrity chef and cookbook author who helms six Mexican restaurants in Chicago. "There were a few things I liked drinking, but ... there wasn't much variety, and the quality wasn't very good."

Tides turned when Baja's oldest winery — Bodegas de Santo Tomás, established in 1888 — hired French-trained winemaker Hugo d'Acosta to up its winemaking game. He did, and subsequently established La Escuelita, a charitable school where he teaches winemaking to locals.

"He did an amazing job introducing techniques to the Valle de Guadalupe," Bayless continues. "From there, it just blew up." >

Today, Valle de Guadalupe is home to more than 200 wineries that have spawned stylish hotels and sumptuous restaurants, all primed for adventurous oenophiles.

Start your journey in San Diego, advises Chris Mejia, co-owner with his wife, Jen Kramer, of tour company **Baja Test Kitchen**, which specializes in Baja food and wine tours.

"The wine region is about a 90-minute drive once you cross the border from San Diego into Tijuana," says Mejia, who cautions travelers to learn ahead of time whether their rental provider allows vehicles to cross the border; those that do require insurance from a Mexican insurer in accordance with Mexican law. "Once you cross the border, there's a beautiful highway with coastal views that takes you down to wine country."

Take that highway — scenic Highway 1, a toll road that costs approximately \$6 — from Tijuana to the port city of Ensenada, then drive another 45 minutes inland to the Valle de Guadalupe, where the principal pueblo is tiny El Porvenir.

When you arrive, remember one thing above all else: Valle de Guadalupe is not Napa Valley.

"It has this rustic charm," explains Mejia, who likens Baja travel to a treasure hunt: You

must work for your reward. "You're not going to Paris, France. You're going to a region that's remote and rugged. It's desolate, dirty, dusty. And yet, there's something about it that's uniquely captivating."

One might say the same about its wines. "You get a unique savory-ness in the wine that you don't get anywhere else in the world," Bayless says. Along with the 131-year-old **Bodegas de Santo Tomás** (santo-tomas.com), the many places to savor a taste include **L.A. Cetto** (lacetto.mx), established in 1928 and one of Baja's largest wine producers; **Adobe Guadalupe Vineyards & Inn** (adobeguadalupe.com), which was one of Baja's first boutique wineries when it planted its vines in 1997; **Bodegas Henri Lurton** (bodegashenrilurton.com), which makes French-style wines in the tradition of Bordeaux winemaker and namesake Henri Lurton; **Lechuza Vineyard** (vinoslechuza.com), an American-owned micro-winery that provides wines to The French Laundry, chef Thomas Keller's famous Napa Valley restaurant; and **Las Nubes Bodegas y Viñedos** (vinolasnubesbc.com), which is as beloved for its sweeping views as for its wines.

Restaurants — many of which offer outdoor



Lechuza Vineyard



Las Nubes Bodegas y Viñedos



Finca Altozano



Corazón de Tierra

seating — are “second to none,” says Bayless, whose newest Chicago restaurant, Leña Brava, was inspired by Baja cuisine. His and Mejia’s favorites include **Finca Altozano** (fincaltozano.com), which specializes in local seafood and wood-fired cooking; **Deckman’s en el Mogor** (deckmans.com), where a Michelin-starred chef offers local wood-fired eats; **La Cocina de Doña Esthela** (facebook.com/La-Cocina-de-Doña-Esthela-611834325594139) that serves a Northern Mexican-style breakfast Bayless calls “the best breakfast in the world”; and **Corazón de Tierra** (corazondetierra.com), where the legendary six-course tasting menu changes daily. If you can’t get a reservation at the latter —

there are only 30 seats and two daily seatings — chef Diego Hernández serves gourmet tacos and tostadas from **TROIKA**, his food truck parked outside.

Because one day won’t be enough, Bayless recommends spending the night at **La Villa del Valle** (lavilladelvalle.com), a small luxury inn; **Bruma** (bruma.mx), a winery with hotel rooms and private villas; or **Cuatro Cuatros** (cabanascuatrocuatros.com.mx), which offers “glamping” in luxury tents.

Ultimately, where your itinerary takes you matters less than when you go, which should be sooner rather than later. “It’s magical,” Bayless concludes, “and now is the time to go — before it becomes too touristy.” ■



La Villa del Valle



La Villa del Valle interior



Bruma