

THE WANDERING GOURMET

Baja Fresh

The chefs and vintners working in the Valle de Guadalupe, Mexico's evolving wine trail in Baja California, are laid-back but serious in their way of cooking and drinking.

by COLMAN ANDREWS

CORAZÓN DE TIERRA
A smoked-tuna tostada served with ginger-avocado purée, dried sea lettuce, and uni powder

There's a hunk of warm rustic bread on the table, next to a cruet of fragrant local olive oil. There's a stack of just-made flour tortillas with pots of four different salsas. There's a bottle of earthy Tempranillo from a winery down the road. We're eating Kumiai oysters pulled from the Pacific about 20 miles away and golden-crisp tacos filled with stewed, spiced lamb birria. Bread and tortillas, oysters and tacos, good red wine...

"Where else in the world could you have all this at the same time?" brags chef Javier

Plascencia, who owns this indoor-outdoor restaurant, **Finca Altozano** (fincaltozano.com), overlooking the vineyards and fields of the Valle de Guadalupe in Baja California.

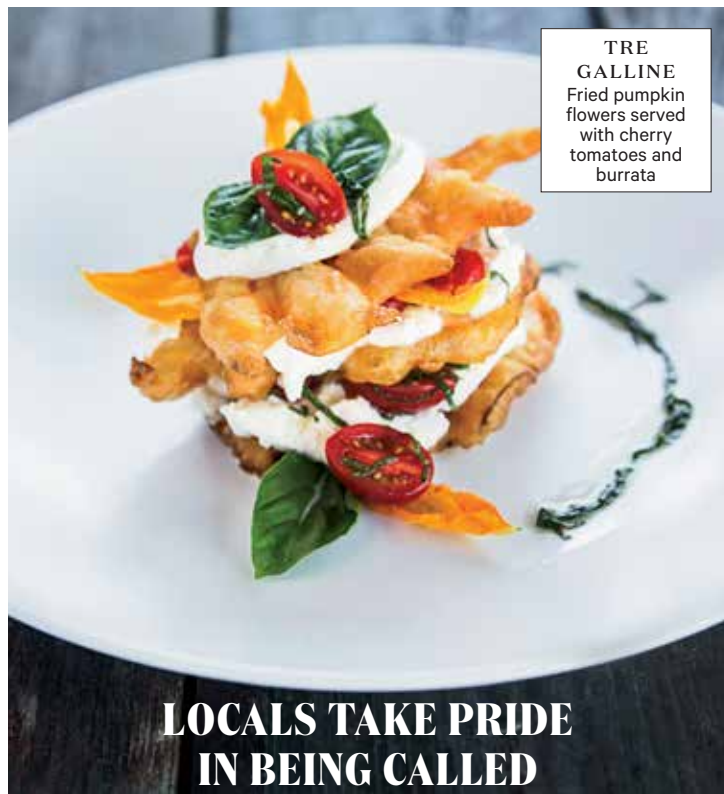
The Valle de Guadalupe—about 50 miles southeast of the U.S. border and a 40-minute drive inland from the raffish port town of Ensenada—is Mexico's premier wine country. Sometimes called "the new Napa Valley," it has also become in recent years a major destination for food lovers from both sides of the line, not least for its *campestres*, or "rustics," casual open-air restaurants where the cooking is done over

wood fires, the ingredients are almost entirely local and organic, and the cuisine is a seamless integration of Spanish, Italian, and Mexican influences known as Baja Mediterranean.

What the valley doesn't have are Napa-style trophy mansions or over-the-top fantasyland wineries modeled after French châteaux. Apart from a couple of two-lane thoroughfares, almost all the roads are rutted dirt—even the ones leading to the best restaurants and inns. In some places, the landscape looks lush with grapevines; in others, it offers the rocky, barren views of coastal Greece or inland Sicily. And the locals like it this way: They may take pride in being compared to Napa for the excellence of their wines, but they are pretty much unanimous in wanting to resist the incursions of a Napa-style tourist culture.

When I first visited the valley ten years ago, the prominent local winemaker Hugo D'Acosta told me that there were 14 wineries in operation, with four more on the way. On my most recent trip, I counted signs for 58, but some guidebooks estimate that there are more than 100.

Born in León, Mexico, and trained in France, D'Acosta opened his **Casa de Piedra** (vinoscasadepiedra.com) winery in 1997, in a fieldstone building designed by his architect brother, Alejandro. In addition to making a spicy Cabernet-Tempranillo blend and a full-flavored unoaked Chardonnay here, D'Acosta, who has been described as “the Mexican Mon-



LOCALS TAKE PRIDE IN BEING CALLED

“THE NEW NAPA”

BUT RESIST NAPA-LIKE TOURIST CULTURE.

davi,” is a partner in several other local wineries, including the forthcoming **Bruma** (bruma.mx) resort and winery, backed in part by the Auberge Resorts' Harmon family (see “Sip and Sleep,” below). He consults for still more and oversees La Escuelita de Oficios el Porvenir, a “little school” of winemaking that seems to have trained half the valley's vigneron.

He was the original wine-maker, for instance, at the valley's first real showplace winery and six-room inn, **Adobe Guadalupe** (adobeguadalupe.com), opened in 1999 by the late Southern California banker Donald Miller and his Dutch-born wife, Tru. Today it's known mostly for its reds (the Cabernet-Syrah Serafiel is particularly good), but it also produces bottles of rosé and Chardonnay.

Dinner is served in the salon, with handsomely set tables and a nightly menu that might include mussel bisque, a salad of just-picked greens from its garden, and simply sautéed fish from the morning's catch. There's a food truck dispensing salads, sandwiches, and tapas, and a campfire behind the hacienda, where Constantino Dal Bon—whose father, Angelo, runs the highly regarded **Tre Galline** (52-646/190-6298), a seasonal Italian restaurant nearby—serves grilled meats and wood-oven-fired pizzas.

Like Tru Miller, expats Phil and Eileen Gregory have a six-room inn, **La Villa del Valle** (lavilladelvalle.com), and a winery, **Vena Cava** (venacavawine.com), which focuses on Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. Designed by Alejandro D'Acosta, the winery has a roof made from old fishing boats, overturned to create domed ceilings, and some of the walls are formed from old bottles. There's a food truck called **Troika** (52-646/156-8030) parked outside it that is famous for its suckling-pig tacos. Serious diners, though, should reserve a table at the on-site restaurant, **Corazón de Tierra** (corazondetierra.com). Chef Diego Hernández harvests

SIP AND SLEEP

There aren't any brand-name hotels in the valley (yet), but there are five boutique hotels and winery B&Bs worth booking.



◀ **ENCUENTRO GUADALUPE**
Billing itself as an antiresort with no cars, TVs, or phones (guests use walkie-talkies), the property has 22 one- and two-bedroom ecolofts, plus a restaurant and bar, winery, and infinity pool. Rooms from \$250; antiresorts.com.

BRUMA
Until this 40-room hotel and residence project opens at Hugo D'Acosta's winery in 2019, guests stay in Casa Ocho, the owners' quarters—seven rustic rooms with fieldstone walls and raw-wood ceilings. Rooms from \$290; bruma.mx.

ADOBE GUADALUPE
The vineyard's Moorish-style adobe hacienda houses six simply furnished rooms. Outside the hacienda's walls are a swimming pool, riding stables, and meditation garden. Rooms from \$275; adobeguadalupe.com.

LA VILLA DEL VALLE
Phil and Eileen Gregory's inn looks like a manor house in Tuscany. The two-level building, surrounded by lavender fields, has a wraparound terrace and six guest rooms with Oaxacan textiles. Rooms from \$275; lavilladelvalle.com.

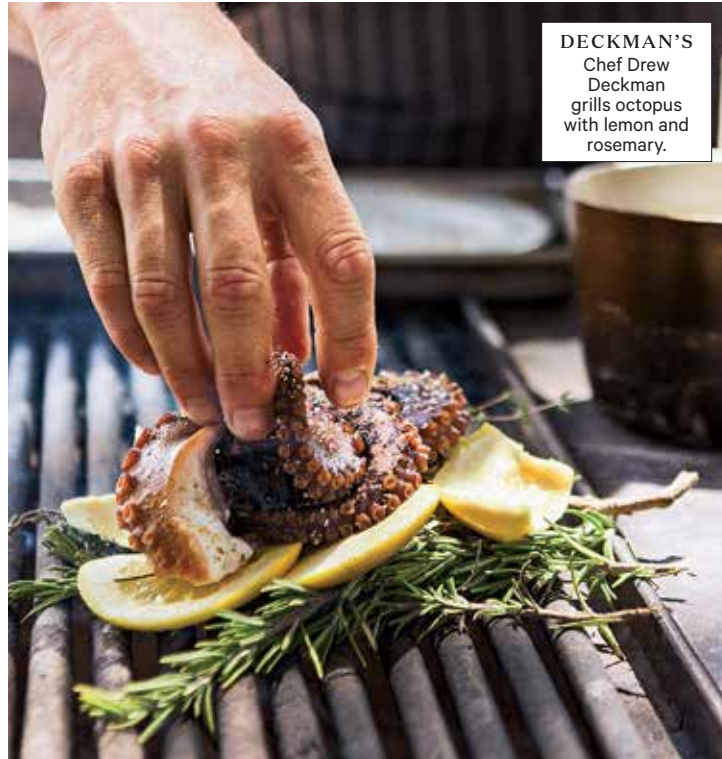
FINCA LA DIVINA
Javier Plascencia, one of the valley's best chefs, runs the four-bedroom house and pool, six miles down the road from his Finca Altozano restaurant. It can be rented by the room or in its entirety. Rooms from \$215; fincaladivina.com.

FROM TOP: CINTIA SOTO; LUIS GARCIA

much of what he serves from the inn's organic vegetable garden and produces some of the valley's most sophisticated cooking—a six-course, fixed-price dinner nightly, including such fare as smoked yellowtail and avocado tostadas, sea urchin and oyster risotto, and fennel ice cream with strawberries.

In 2001 the valley's first serious restaurant, **Laja** (lajamexico.com), was opened—before anyone had ever heard of Baja Mediterranean—by chef Jair Téllez, who once worked for Daniel Boulud. Laja is no campfire. It's a comfortable trattoria-like restaurant with wood floors, beam ceilings, and oversize wooden tables, serving two four-course, fixed-price menus (which can be combined into a single eight-course one) that change frequently. Some of the typical dishes include beet salad with homemade “rancho” dressing and fennel vinaigrette, grilled octopus with aioli and wisps of crisp-fried onion, and grilled quail with puréed leeks and caramelized scallions.

Ten minutes down the road is **Silvestre** (52-646/175-7073)—meaning “wild”—run by the magnificently mustachioed Benito Molina and his wife and cochef, Solange Muris, proprietors of Ensenada's acclaimed Manzanilla. This summertime, cash-only campestre is so informal it makes Finca Altozano look like a downtown



dining room. Diners sit at communal picnic tables set with plastic lace place mats; the open-air kitchen is fueled entirely by wood. And yet the food is varied and superb: flank steak tacos with black beans, pork loin tostadas with homemade ricotta and pickled cactus, and crispy-skinned rock cod.

One of the valley's most popular restaurants is **Deckman's** (deckmans.com) at Cavas del Mogor winery. Chef-proprietor Drew Deckman is a Georgia native who worked under legendary French chefs Paul Bocuse and Jacques

Maximin and won a Michelin star while cooking in Germany. Working year-round at an elaborate complex of outdoor grills while diners sit outdoors beneath the pine trees or in a “dining room” with a corrugated tin roof and hay-bale walls, Deckman, a serious fisherman, draws on the local catch (and on produce raised at Cavas del Mogor) for dishes like rock cod ceviche with fermented habanero chilies and tomatillos, raw spot prawns with jalapeño vinaigrette, and roasted pork jowl with smoked octopus and baby vegetables.

While morning meals of homemade granola, fresh fruit, and farmyard egg dishes are common at the valley's B&Bs, the best breakfasts are widely considered to be those served at **La Cocina de Doña Esthela** (52-646/156-8453). Here, Blanca Esthela Martínez

Bueno dishes up heroic portions of huevos rancheros with grilled sausages, shredded dried beef scrambled with eggs from her farm, and the house specialty, *borrego tatemado*, mildly spicy wood-roasted lamb (yes, for breakfast) accompanied by an endless supply of warm flour tortillas turned out on a griddle in the dining room. Doña Esthela's is not a campestre and it's not Baja Mediterranean in style, but it's yet another example of what makes the Valle de Guadalupe such a delicious destination. ♦



The firm Meyer Davis and Mexican interior designer Gloria Cortina worked on the space.

Meanwhile, Tequila

In San Miguel de Allende, Casa Dragones opens a small but mighty six-seat bar.

AT 193 SQUARE FEET, Casa Dragones' new tasting room is the world's tiniest tequila bar. It's taken up residence in Dóce 18, a mansion turned retail space in San Miguel de Allende, in Mexico's central highlands, where the brand's cofounder, media executive Bob Pittman, is a part-time resident. The walls and ceiling are lined with 4,000 black tiles, handmade from obsidian stones pulled from the volcanic soil on the company's agave fields in Tequila. Almost everything else—the floor tiles, the carpentry, the leather banquette—was also made in Mexico. Casa Dragones, started in 2008 by Pittman and Grupo Jose Cuervo veteran Bertha González Nieves, has two spirits: Joven (\$275) and Blanco (\$75). Tastings last about an hour and must be secured in advance. *Email conciierge@casadragones.com for reservations.* —Elizabeth Sile