



Written by Jancis Robinson 18 Mar 2017

A Mexican wave of wine

A shorter version of this is published by the Financial Times. See also my tasting notes and more detail (<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/mexican-wine-bajas-success-story>) on Baja California's special characteristics.

'None of this was here!' We heard this about every five minutes as we drove south down the California coast into Mexico. We were on our way to Mexico's wine country in Baja California with the splendidly named Wyatt Peabody, a California wine professional who spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Baja, surfing, shooting the breeze and, eventually, falling in love with Valle de Guadalupe, the epicentre of the Mexican wine scene. High-rise hotels and condominiums now line the Pacific coastline. And once we had turned into the valley he kept squealing at signs advertising wine museums, tasting rooms and boutique hotels. All were new to him, and roads he knew as dusty tracks are now wide and paved.

Twenty years ago he had played a part in building the valley's seventh winery Adobe Guadalupe. The few people involved with wine then felt like true pioneers in a country devoted to beer, brandy and tequila. Today there are about 150 wineries. The annual Vendimia harvest festival has recently been extended to more than two weeks long.

I made my first trip to Mexican wine country last month expecting to play the part of Lady Bountiful. My idea was that I would go, explore, report and publicise these little-known wines to the world outside, thereby extending a helping hand to a nascent wine industry. Ha! Locals may hate the comparison but the Valle de Guadalupe reminded me of nothing more than a slightly untidy Napa Valley. There seem to be tourists and restaurants everywhere. And money has been flowing in to the oenotourism business not just from the US but from Mexico City a three-hour flight away. We were told more than once that Mexico City is a blast, home to more billionaires than anywhere else, and by no means all of that money is narco-related. The Mexican economy is booming, and so is the wine business to judge from our short visit. Chefs at the valley's more admired restaurants were typically elsewhere, busy setting up satellite establishments in Vancouver or New York. (Below is one of several chic food trucks associated with wineries in the valley.)

We were told that 'the only thing that stopped a massive American influx was 2008', but most of this rash of small wineries are Mexican-owned. The biggest by far is L A Cetto, started by an Italian family who arrived in the valley during the dying days of American Prohibition. It's still run by 'Don Luis', 82, who comes into the office every day. Cetto produces about half of all Mexico's wine, aiming to sell 1.3 million cases this year, and own 600 ha (1,480 acres) of vines in the Valle de Guadalupe, 120 ha in San Antonio de la Minas just north of the port of Ensenada, 500 ha in the cooler, less drought-stricken Valle de San Vicente to the south, and 80 ha of dry-farmed 90-year-old Zinfandel just south of the US

border east of Tijuana. They are also planning to develop a new wine region in Chihuahua, the north-eastern Mexican state across the border from Texas.

Don Luis's son, called Luis of course, reports that vineyard labour, traditionally undertaken by itinerant agricultural workers, is becoming a problem and he is considering mechanising many operations. In stark contrast to our time north of the Rio Grande, we hardly heard the words Trump or wall. The Mexicans we met seemed to be getting along just fine – although as we sat in the 90-minute queue to re-enter the US from Tijuana, Wyatt bemoaned the cheap Chinese copies of Mexican handicrafts being hawked from car to car.

The more quality-conscious Baja producers are a bit frustrated by the lack of ambition shown by L A Cetto, one of the few exporters of Mexican wine. Cetto may harvest and vinify different lots separately, as is the current fashion, but then all ingredients are mixed together into vast varietal bottlings – admittedly dependable and very keenly priced, but slightly bland ambassadors. Cabernet still rules the roost in Baja when Rhône varieties are probably much more suitable for the dry climate, although L A Cetto's Nebbiolo, available throughout Europe, Canada, the US and Japan, would be a perfect introduction to Mexican wine. No one is quite sure which Nebbiolo it is. Luis Cetto assured me it was 'the Cetto clone'.

As a sign of the times, Cetto's longtime winemaker Camillo Magoni has left to set up his own boutique winery Casa Magoni on high ground at the entrance to the valley where the cooling Pacific influence is most marked. L A Cetto's substantial headquarters are well inland of here at the head of the valley, overlooked by the old Domecq bodega that looks as though it has been transplanted from Jerez, where its original Spanish owners were based. Since then it has passed through the books of multinational drinks companies Allied Domecq and Pernod Ricard and was recently sold to the family sherry company González Byass, pausing only to divest itself of most of its vineyards.

A good 200 ha of Domecq's best and oldest vines went to Hugo D'Acosta (above), a French-trained Mexican who could be credited with, or accused of, being one of the major reasons for the transformation of the Valle de Guadalupe from backwater to tourist mecca. In the late 1990s he set up a wine school, Escuelita in Porvenir, in order to empower the locals, whom he saw then as impoverished and in danger of being taken advantage of by the big companies. This building, entirely constructed of rejects and recycled wine-related objects in the style of his successful architect brother Alejandro, is now swamped by applications from wannabe winemakers, some of whom, such as Phil Gregory of Vena Cava, have settled in the valley and developed their own wineries together with, in the case of the Gregorys, a boutique hotel, La Villa del Valle, a celebrated restaurant next door and, the *accoutrement du jour*, a food truck (see below for where we enjoyed a delicious lunch of tacos therefrom).

They freely admit that they have become celebrities, and tell of being recognised in the street in Mexico City where they are constructing a second home. Discouraged from depending on their own vines because of the valley's chronic water shortage (relieved somewhat this year by the tail end of the rains that have, at last, refilled California's dams – Wyatt kept exclaiming at how green everything was), Gregory now buys in almost all of his grapes, a mix from all the valleys, and, like a painter with a palette, constructs some fascinating blends.

I asked him, a relative veteran of the valley, how he felt about its current dynamic state. 'I feel happy, sad - and a little bit guilty', he said with a wry smile.

FAVOURITE BAJA WINES

All of these are red and most are Rhône blends.

Adobe Guadalupe, Kerubiel 2008

Bodegas Henri Lurton, Reserva Cabernet Sauvignon 2015

La Lomita, Pagano 2014

Las Nubes, Cumulus 2012

Vena Cava Cabernet Sauvignon 2014

Vena Cava, Big Blend 2014