

Baja's Boom

Against the odds, the Mexican wine industry is thriving

BY AARON ROMANO

Until recently, it was nearly impossible to find a good bottle of wine from Mexico. That's not a knock against Mexican winemakers, but the reality of the marketplace. "Fifteen years ago, it was pretty hard to make people understand that Mexico was even making wine," says Michelle Martain, owner of San Diego-based importer La Mission Associates. "I started by importing three wineries. Now I have 26."

Growth in the U.S. market is representative of the trajectory in Mexico itself, where the economy has improved and the middle class is expanding. The government approved legislation in 2017 aimed to increase wine production and to promote the industry. Once these laws are fully implemented, the price of Mexican wines—and the high taxes on their sale—are expected to drop precipitously.

In the meantime, locals are doing their part by steadily increasing their wine consumption to 1 liter per capita, up from just 150ml 15 years ago. Vintners have taken notice. They've been making strides to improve their wines through lowered yields and modern winemaking practices. Increased awareness has led to a dramatic surge in foreign investment and tourism in northern Baja California, which is just an hour and a half drive from the U.S. border near San Diego. Nearly all of the area's wineries have tasting rooms, and an abundance of hotels and restaurants have sprouted up in the past decade.

Yet despite these developments, Mexico's wine industry is still in its infancy. Thirty years ago there were just five wineries in all of Mexico. Today there are more than 300, most concentrated in northern Baja, which accounts for nearly 90% of the country's wine production, yielding a total of 1.6 million cases. Until recently, however, limited distribution narrowed availability of these wines to inexpensive, large-volume bottlings. But this has changed over the past few years, with U.S. imports of Mexican wine increasing to 17,604 cases in 2016, up 50% from 2015, according to *Impact Databank*, a sister publication of *Wine Spectator*.

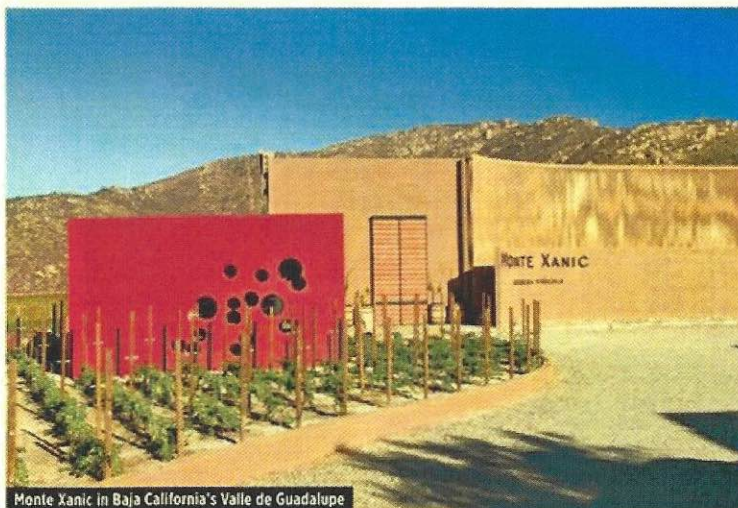
In Napa, Thomas Keller's latest restaurant, the Oaxacan-inspired La Calenda, offers 25 Baja wines, suited to pair with the cuisine. General manager Eric Jefferson says when people come to Napa, they expect to taste Napa, but they've been open to exploring. "We know the wines might be a little more obscure, but we want our wine list to open doors to show what Mexico is capable of."

In many ways, the history of Mexican wine parallels that of its northern neighbor, California, with Spanish padres first planting vines near their missions. But Mexico took much longer to develop a modern industry. It wasn't until the 1970s that commercial wine production entered the scene, with the arrival of Casa Pedro Domecq and L.A. Cetto, now two of Mexico's largest wineries. Another prominent producer, Monte Xanic, was founded in 1987 as the country's first boutique winery. Beginning with 6,000 cases, it has grown to 95,000 today.

For a look at this transformation, senior editor Kim Marcus and I

conducted *Wine Spectator's* first-ever comprehensive blind tasting of Mexican wines. I tasted along as he reviewed 40 samples at our Napa office, and though quality and style fluctuated, there were plenty of refined versions. Four wines achieved outstanding scores of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, while another 30 earned scores in the very good range of 85 to 89 points—an impressive showing overall. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at WineSpectator.com/MexicoAlpha121519.)

The red wines lean toward deep colors and heavy extractions, showing jamminess. The whites tend to be crisp and fresh, though a few use oak to produce a richer style. Several examples have a saline quality running through, which can provide a mouthwatering element even in



Monte Xanic in Baja California's Valle de Guadalupe

wines that are naturally low in acidity, producing a nice briny or mineral character. (The historic problem of excessive salinity, the result of poor irrigation and low rainfall, continues to diminish as a concern.)

Within northern Baja lies the heart of Mexican winegrowing, Valle de Guadalupe, located north of Ensenada, about 20 miles from the Pacific. Situated around 1,000 feet above sea level, the region has the feel of high desert, with craggy slopes laden with large boulders surrounding the valley on three sides. Palms, cacti and farmland intermingle with swaths of vineyards, planted to soils ranging from gravel and alluvial sand to dense red clay. The climate is hot and dry. Summer temperatures average 86° F, and annual rainfall is just 8 to 10 inches. Yet its proximity to the coast allows for a Mediterranean climate, with cool Pacific breezes tempering the hot days and providing a significant diurnal shift.

The top wine is Bodegas Henri Lurton's Nebbiolo Valle de Guadalupe 2017 (91 points, \$35), which grew out of a 2014 visit to Baja by Bordeaux's Henri Lurton, owner of Château Brane-Cantenac, to explore its potential. The next year he sent a team back to get the project off the ground: his two sons, Vincent and Nicolas, and winemaker Lourdes Martinez Ojeda, an Ensenada native then working at Brane-Cantenac.

There's some debate about whether or not the Nebbiolo in Mexico is truly Nebbiolo. Some believe that the country's plantings are part

Piemontese Nebbiolo and part Piedrosso, another red variety with origins in the southern Italian region of Campania. Martinez Ojeda—now winemaker for another Valle de Guadalupe winery, Vinícola Bruma—is among those who think it's definitely not true Nebbiolo, yet she notes that the typicity of the Mexican variety can't be hidden. "It does have a huge character, even if it's not traditional," she says. Despite changes in winemaking, the signature style of the region's Nebbiolo reveals itself year after year in the wine's intensity. "Call it whatever you want, it's definitely ours."

Though varietal wines like Nebbiolo are popular, nearly half the bottlings under review are blends, some of them traditional, others more offbeat. The various microclimates throughout the region allow for a variety of grapes to be grown, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache, Zinfandel, Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay in addition to Nebbiolo. Part of the impetus for making blends is the newness of the region. "Wine is not a recipe, you have to adapt and develop strategy," says Martinez Ojeda, noting that winemakers still need a better understanding of the region's soils and climate to know which grapes do best in which areas. "We're still in diapers," she says.

Another factor is the lack of regulation in Mexican wine law, which



Winemaker Lourdes Martinez Ojeda crafted this report's top wine.

doesn't include rules covering appellations, labels or blends. During this current period of growth, says Lechuga winemaker Kristin Shute, "We all embrace differences rather than impose a universal standard." Her Amantes Valle de Guadalupe 2015 (90, \$30) is on the unconventional side when it comes to blends, combining Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Merlot, Nebbiolo and Tempranillo for a lively and engaging mix of fruit flavors, with an open texture and supple finish. Shute says that one of the benefits to blending is that winemakers can utilize different varieties to balance out the style they're trying to achieve.

For now, Mexico is embracing the absence of a signature grape while riding the strength of its blends. But there are hurdles to overcome for the young industry, including the need for modern winemaking infrastructure and access to clean water for irrigation. Shute says Baja winemakers are all trying to make the best wine possible for themselves and for one another. "If someone's first impression is a wine from Lechuga, I hope I did a great job, so that it reflects on the entire region." Slowly, Mexico's reputation for wine is evolving and gaining momentum.

Associate tasting coordinator Aaron Romano has been with Wine Spectator since 2012. Senior editor Kim Marcus contributed to this report.

KIM MARCUS' RECOMMENDED WINES FROM MEXICO

Nearly 40 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at WineSpectator.com/MexicoAlpha121519. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BODEGAS HENRI LURTON Nebbiolo Valle de Guadalupe 2017 Kirsch, raspberry tart and red currant flavors are crunchy and fresh-tasting in this vibrant red, with Asian spice and black olive notes.	91	\$35	ALDO PALAFOX Pionero Cosecha Selecta Baja California 2017 Hot stone hints accent raspberry, kirsch and wild plum flavors, with a lithe finish showing sandalwood and spice notes. Tempranillo blend.	88	\$22
ADOBE GUADALUPE Gabriel Baja California 2015 Savory and rich, with good cut to the dark cherry and brambly flavors, showing inky and Asian spice accents. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	90	\$42	BODEGAS DE SANTO TOMÁS Cabernet Baja California ST 2017 Dried berry and cherry flavors lead to floral and dried rose petal details, with plenty of minerality. Finishes with a briny hint.	88	\$16
LECHUZA Amantes Valle de Guadalupe 2015 Offers lively flavors of plum pastry and cherry pie, open-textured and engaging, with a supple finish. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	90	\$30	L.A. CETTO Don Luis Terra Valle de Guadalupe 2015 Lively, with a saline quality to the red fruit flavors. Brambly midpalate, with flinty and savory accents. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	88	\$23
MONTE XANIC Gran Ricardo Valle de Guadalupe 2015 Well-structured and pure-tasting, with a ripe core of baked red fruit flavors, followed by a lithe finish. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	90	\$70	VENA CAVA Big Blend Valle de Guadalupe 2017 A cedary edge accents the bright red berry and cherry tart flavors, with savory richness and zesty minerality. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	88	\$34
BODEGAS HACIENDA LA LOMITA Tinto de la Hacienda Valle de Guadalupe 2015 Zesty and open-textured, offering a lively mix of boysenberry, cherry and plum flavors, with a broad finish. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	89	\$22	MONTE XANIC Chenin-Colombard Baja California 2018 Apple pastry flavors show hints of richness in this ripe white, with lemon meringue notes lingering on the finish.	87	\$15
CAVA MACIEL Alba Baja California 2014 Plum pudding flavors show notes of dried sour cherry and mocha, with vanilla and spice accents on the finish. Cabernet Sauvignon.	89	\$30	L.A. CETTO Chardonnay Valle de Guadalupe Reserva Privada 2018 Aromas and flavors of baked apple and ripe pear are well-knit in this white, which is buttery midpalate, with a well-spiced finish.	87	\$20
PAOLONI Nebbiolo Valle de Guadalupe 2013 Ripe, with jammy flavors of dark cherry and berry carrying rich tea notes. Effusive dark chocolate details lead to a creamy finish.	89	\$43	VALLE DE TINTOS Cabernet Sauvignon Baja California 2015 Juicy fig and toast notes fold into the effusively spiced crushed red fruit flavors, with chocolaty accents on the creamy finish.	87	\$29
VIÑEDOS MALAGÓN Equua Valle de Guadalupe 2014 Ripe, jammy and decadently spiced, with concentrated red plum, dark cherry and raspberry flavors. Grenache and Petite Sirah.	89	\$30	BODEGAS HACIENDA LA LOMITA Discreto Encanto Valle de Guadalupe 2017 Stony notes and accents of dried sage flank ripe apple and baked pear flavors in this white. Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc.	86	\$16