



Written by
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Mexican wine - Baja's success story



See more in [A Mexican wave of wine on Saturday](#).

Having been intrigued for many years by the sound of Baja California, where nearly all Mexican wine is made, I finally made it there last month. It was not at all as I expected, as I will explain on Saturday.

I could quite understand the geographical features of the Valle de Guadalupe, the main wine valley that runs inland from Ensenada, one of the few deep-sea ports on the Pacific coast. Clearly this sandy, loamy valley, an hour or two's drive south of the wall (see my picture below taken just south of Tijuana through the car window) that already marks the border between California and Mexico at this western end, needs all the cooling influence it can get. And what it is now seriously short of is water.



Water is particularly crucial to how wines made here taste. The most obvious fault in the least successful ones is that they taste **too salty**. There are almost as many theories as to why as there are winemakers in the valley but for veteran viticulturist Jose Fernandez of Adobe Guadalupe, and the team at the dominant winery L A Cetto, it's a symptom of drought stress and the solution is to water the vines regularly, even after the grapes change colour - although water is a very precious commodity in the Valle de Guadalupe.

It's so dry here that schools close and life grinds to a halt when it rains. The rains that restored much-needed water to California's dams and reservoirs in early 2017 came this far south too and everything looked much greener than usual, we were told. Most years are so dry that average yields are a modest 35 hl/ha but hopes are high for a more plentiful 2017 vintage.



Lulu Martinez-Ojeda (right above with Vincent and Nicolas Lurton and the barrels they ferment their reds in) is setting up what should be a particularly trail-blazing bodega for Henri Lurton of Ch Brane-Cantenac in Bordeaux, picking weeks earlier than most of their neighbours. She claims the blame for salinity rests with particularly deep wells, which she has been careful to avoid when choosing their fruit sources. Others, like the valley's leading light Hugo D'Acosta of Casa de Piedra and several other enterprises, regard salinity as a regional character that is particularly marked in young wines that are the product of long maceration and new oak. He claims the salty character disappears with a few years in bottle.

Some palates are more troubled by this saline quality than others. I don't mind a little - in fact in some wines such as Syrah and some oaked Sauvignon Blancs, I find it a positive attribute. And I was intrigued when, during my visit in Vosne-Romanée last November, Louis-Michel Liger-Belair volunteered that he was actively seeking some saltiness in his red and white burgundies.

As in Napa Valley, most plantings are on the relatively sandy valley floor - in the case of Guadalupe at an elevation of around 300-350 m (985-1,150 ft), although Hugo D'Acosta, Monte Xanic and L A Cetto all have some vineyards on the (gentle) hillsides of the Valle de Guadalupe closer to 500 m/1,640 ft (see below).



At his carefully designed Paralelo winery, D'Acosta produces one wine from sandy soils, **Ensamble Arenal**, and its counterpart from higher clay-rich ones, **Ensamble Colina**.

The sandy quality of the valley-floor vineyards means that the great majority of vines are planted on their own roots, but drought-resistant rootstocks such as 1103 are being employed for some of the more recently planted vineyards.

The wind blows from east to west in the morning and from the ocean west to east in the afternoon. The main disease pressure is powdery mildew but some years they don't have to spray at all in this dry climate. Acid additions are routine because of the high pH thanks to the soil.

Although Valle de Guadalupe with its proximity to the US border is likely to remain the centre of activity for wine tourism and therefore the location of the great majority of Mexico's wineries, many wine producers are actively seeking fruit from, or vineyard land in, less expensive areas with a less chronic water shortage. Land in the Valle de Guadalupe can easily cost \$100,000 a hectare without dams, wells or water rights.

The subdistrict at relatively high elevations at the cool entrance to the valley closest to Ensenada, known as San Antonio de las Minas, is home to the rather impressive Vinisterra operation, and L A Cetto have vineyards here too.

The Valle San Vicente an hour or so south is a bit lower – 200-300 m (655-985 ft) elevation as opposed to the Valle de Guadalupe's 300-350 m – cooler, being more open to the ocean, and enjoys higher rainfall. Soils here are higher in clay than in the Valle de Guadalupe and San Vicente is now producing about as much wine as Guadalupe – although Valle de Guadalupe remains the most popular appellation cited on labels, wherever the grapes are grown. At the Henri Lurton bodega, for instance, they use the Guadalupe appellation but explain on the back label where the grapes came from – generally San Vicente and Santo Tomás, where the soils' clay content tends to higher. They were put off by the salinity of some Guadalupe wines.

The Valle de Santo Tomás is, naturally enough, dominated by the **Bodega Santo Tomás**, although it now has a tasting room in the Valle de Guadalupe.

Hillier Ochos Rios is another potential wine district in Baja at an elevation of about 750 m (2,460 ft). It has pretty good supplies of water but is prone to frost. Adobe Guadalupe has made a major investment in Ochos Rios – 760 ha (1,880 acres) in total of which 20 ha are so far planted with vines. Like several other Baja wine producers, Adobe Guadalupe are also in the olive oil business.

Then there is some wine activity near Tecate well inland of Valle de Guadalupe almost on the border where influential restaurateur Jair Téllez (the seminal Laja in Guadalupe and Merotoro in Mexico City) has a joint venture, Bichi, with the French-born producer of natural wines in Chile, Louis-Antoine Luyt. Ancient Mission vines are being transformed into edgy, light-bodied wines.

And, way to the east, L A Cetto has made a major investment in the much cheaper Chihuahua province south of Texas – yet to be planted but Michel Rolland is rumoured to be involved.

As for grape varieties, the valley was originally planted with Mission (known as País in Chile). Then came a wave of Rhôneish varieties and then in the 1940s, thanks partly to the Italian influence of the big producer Santo Tomás and their winemaker, Italian varieties such as Dolcetto, Freisa, Barbera and Nebbiolo were planted by some, often as a field blend known as 'Italian mixture'. A variety known as Nebbiolo is still relatively common, and successful. Cetto claim that all plantings in their ambit are true Nebbiolo. Others told me that examination of Nebbiolo vines revealed a field blend of Nebbiolo, Barbera and Freisa.

Of the 150 wine producers concentrated mainly in the Valle de Guadalupe, about 120 produce fewer than 1,000 cases of wine, and only Santo Tomás, Monte Xanic and L A Cetto have real critical mass. Wineries typically buy most of their grapes, putting pressure on grape prices that are currently around \$1,200 to \$2,000 a tonne.

In the 1990s the global fashion for international varieties arrived, with the big companies paying more for bordeaux grapes than for the more traditional and better established ones. Far too many old vines were pulled out in this drive to plant international varieties, much to D'Acosta's chagrin. Most growers realise that Mediterranean varieties are much more suitable for these dry conditions than Cabernet and Merlot.

I was told that Mission grapes remain problematic because those who grow them are typically very senior and don't really understand the wine business.



In a wide-ranging tasting organised at Bruma (view from there above), a combination of spa hotel, private villas and a winery currently under construction, Hugo d'Acosta's latest project financed from Mexico City, I found the wines based on bordeaux red wine varieties the least convincing – even though Cabernet Sauvignon remains the most-planted variety. Grenache and 'Nebbiolo' seemed particularly successful. See my tasting notes below.

Blends rather than varietals are common, as are relatively old wines – and Petite Sirah is apparently very easy to grow and make here.

California influence has been understandably strong, and for white wines Chenin Blanc was long advocated because of its combination of high yield and acidity. Some Colombard was also planted in the 1960s, though Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay inevitably followed. I found in general that the reds were much more successful than the whites, although Henri Lurton's new team (which includes two of his sons, pictured above) have found some exceptional old-vine Chenin Blanc for white wine.

Most of the wineries here are Mexican-owned. Ray Magnussen of Lechuza Vineyards and the Millers of Adobe Guadalupe are unusual in being foreign owners of Baja wine operations. Specialist US importers of Mexican wines include Michelle Martain of La Misión Associates and Tom Bracamontes of La Competencia Imports. Baja wines are now available in California, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Nevada, Illinois and North Carolina, but not (yet) in New York, where you would think there would be enough curious wine drinkers to make this viable. Thanks to heavy domestic taxes, Mexican wines can sometimes be cheaper on export markets.

One of the most impressive winemakers I met in Baja is now a Mexican citizen but was born in Derbyshire in northern England. He met his wife Eileen while sailing round the Caribbean and they had successful respective careers in music and documentaries in Los Angeles before exploring south of the Rio Grande. Phil was intrigued by the Escuelita winemaker school founded in Baja California by Hugo D'Acosta and, after learning how to make wine, decided to establish his own bodega. He clearly has great winemaking sensibility and operates rather like Sean Thackrey in Marin in northern California, buying grapes and blending unusual wines. (The vines he planted round his winery and boutique hotel are shrivelled for lack of water.) He is now rather successfully dabbling in natural wines and, in his winery topped with upturned boats (see below; like most wineries the work of Hugo D'Acosta's architect brother Alejandro), just seems to be having fun.



'Here we often have long lunches and dinners', he explained, 'often one after the other, so I didn't want to make especially big reds. I am trying to reduce the alcohols. It's not very important to me to make a wine that lasts 20 years. I just try to be gentle with the grapes; you don't need to squeeze everything out.'

The highly successful Escuelita, built entirely of re-used wine-related materials, is now run by Thomas Egli from Switzerland (below). He confesses he had to relearn everything he knew when he arrived from the land of rain, stainless steel and new oak to the open concrete fermenters and re-used barrels of Escuelita.



One of his countrymen, Christophe Gärtner, is also responsible for some impressive wines carrying the Vinisterra label. Unfortunately I tasted nothing from the Torres Alegre bodega that produces the most expensive wines, made in tiny quantities by a Bordeaux-trained Mexican. I was told he aged one white wine for 20 years.

Tourism is now massive in the Valle de Guadalupe, where roads that were once dusty tracks are now wide and paved. But one of Hugo D'Acosta's sayings is 'Bad roads, good tourists. Good roads, bad tourists.'

And if anyone doubts that wine has finally arrived in Mexico, note that he is now sending grapes to a rooftop urban winery in Mexico City.

The 63 wines below are listed in alphabetical order by producer and then by colour and vintage. You can re-order them yourself.

Order by ▼

- **Aborigen, Clandestino 2016 Valle de Guadalupe** *Aged in inox. Vineyard planted in 1973. Personal project of Hugo D'Acosta with bought-in grapes. Chenin adds a bit of fruit to the Sauvignon Blanc.*
Broad and quite rich. Good balance, weight and interest. Drink 2017-2018
16
- **Aborigen, Clandestino 2014 San Vicente** *Grenache. 12 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1982. From the same vineyard as the Tres Valles Grenache!*
Mid ruby. Dusty overlay - not unpleasant! - on very ripe fruit. Sweet berry fruit rather reminiscent of Zinfandel but with a hint of rose petals. Very well managed but obvious tannins. Drink 2017-2021
16.5
- **Adobe de Guadalupe, Jardin Romantico 2015 Valle de Guadalupe** *100% unoaked Chardonnay. 400 cases made from grapes bought from Santo Tomás.*
Tastes of Chardonnay but not sweetness or alcohol. Clean and fresh with a certain 'minerality' but a tad timid. 11.9% Drink 2016-2017
15.5
- **Adobe de Guadalupe, Jardin Magico 2016 Valle de Guadalupe** *100% unoaked Sauvignon Blanc. 60 cases only.*
Lime on the nose, not that intense. Just off dry. Refreshing enough drink on a hot day in the valley but not worth exporting. 11.9% Drink 2017
15.5
- **Adobe de Guadalupe, Kerubiel 2013** *Valle de Guadalupe 36% Syrah, 18% Cinsault, 27%*

Mourvèdre, 17% Grenache. 12 months in oak.

Bright mid crimson. Nicely married, ripe southern Rhôneish flavours. Sweet start and some tarriness but relatively sophisticated. Just a hint of alcohol on the end. Lightly chewy but a fine example of the valley style without exaggeration. 13.6% Drink 2016-2020

16.5

- **Adobe de Guadalupe, Kerubiel 2008** Valle de Guadalupe 44% Syrah, 36% Cinsault, 16% Mourvèdre, 3% Grenache, 1% Viognier – their attempt at a Châteauneuf-ish blend. Sweet and perfumed. Round with good balance – like a Châteauneuf without too much alcohol. Fully evolved but in its prime with lots of life and spicy interest. Drink 2013-2020

17

- **Adobe de Guadalupe, Gabriel 2014** Valle de Guadalupe 44% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Merlot, 22% Malbec. 12 months in oak.

Mid crimson. Nice freshness on the nose. Slightly sweet and syrupy on the start, then like fermented blackcurrant fruit gums. Could do with a little more lift and delicacy. Tannins still present on the end. 13.6% Drink 2018-2023

16

- **Adobe de Guadalupe, Serafiel 2014** Valle de Guadalupe 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 50% Syrah. 10 months in oak.

Mid ruby. Transparent and more lifted and readable than the Gabriel. Racy with the blackcurrant gum feature of Gabriel but a more savoury, lightly leathery end. Some may wish for more fruit in the middle. 13.6% Drink 2017-2022

16

- **Adobe de Guadalupe, Rafael 2013** Valle de Guadalupe 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 50% Nebbiolo. Most unusual blend! 13 months in oak.

Deep purplish crimson. Very savoury nose and then slightly sweet and syrupy palate. But it's rescued on the end by the tannins and tar of Nebbiolo. A very youthful wine but a convincing one. 13.9% Drink 2019-2024

16.5

- **La Carrodilla Chenin Blanc 2016** Valle de Guadalupe Aged in inox. Vineyard planted in 2008. Pale straw gold. Slightly industrial nose. Lacks a bit of acidity. Heavy and perhaps just a little too sweet but probably quite easy to like. Bit hot and floral. Drink 2017

15

- **L A Cetto, Fumé Blanc 2016** Valle de Guadalupe Rather industrial nose. Off dry. Not much fruity follow-through. Simple. 12.5% Drink 2017

15

- **L A Cetto Viognier 2016** Valle de Guadalupe 'Clay soils best for Viognier.' Very flowery and almost headily over the top! Must be a nice change but the added acid is very prominent. 13.4% Drink 2017

15

- **L A Cetto Chenin Blanc 2015** Valle de Guadalupe RS 9-10 g/l. Slight hint of filter pads. Sweet start and the acid sticks out. 12.5% Drink 2016-2018

15

- **L A Cetto, Private Reserve Chardonnay 2014** Valle de Guadalupe Barrel fermented, 100% new French oak. Bâtonnage. 100% malolactic fermentation.

Neutral nose. Sweet start. Could have been made anywhere – reasonably hot. Slightly salty end. Drink 2016-2018

15

- **L A Cetto Zinfandel 2014** Baja California From 'lovingly nurtured vines' according to the back label. Pale crimson. Leathery nose with some hint of drains and lots of sweet syrupiness on the palate. Strong rusty nails sensation on the end. 14% Drink 2016-2018

16

- L A Cetto Petite Sirah 2014 Valle de Guadalupe Very dark purple. Round and full with sweet and sour elderberry aromas. Falls away quite fast. 13.5% Drink 2016-2019
£8 RRP 15.5
- L A Cetto, Reserve Petite Sirah 2014 Valle de Guadalupe Blackish purple. Salty and lifted. Sweet and then tannic. Cool and fresh. Drink 2017-2020
16
- L A Cetto Zinfandel 2013 Baja California Transparent ruby. Fresh nose and nice balance. Lots of angular chewiness. Some lift and refreshment, but a slight lack of fruit in the middle. 13.5% Drink 2015-2017
15.5
- L A Cetto, Reserva Privada Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 Valle de Guadalupe *Growing close to the winery.*
Very superior fruit. Luscious and round and nicely balanced. Just slightly hollow but pretty **GV**. 13.2% Drink 2016-2019
\$14 RRP 16
- L A Cetto, Don Luis 2013 Valle de Guadalupe *Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot blend.*
Blackish ruby. Sweet and lightish on the nose. Very sweet, syrupy palate entry and the alcohol is pretty prominent. Rusty nails on the end. 13.4% Drink 2016-2019
16
- L A Cetto, Reserva Privada Nebbiolo 2012 Valle de Guadalupe *Assures me it's real Nebbiolo ('Cetto clone', the first sold commercially) they have been working with since 1972 - 1986 was when it first became commercially available); some planted in Valle de Guadalupe and some in San Vicente.*
Blackish crimson. Leathery and rich and exciting. Very sweet Mexican start and just a hint of syrup, then tannins. Very dry end. 13.9% Drink 2017-2021
16.5
- Emevé Malbec 2013 Valle de Guadalupe *Aged for 12 months in French (20% new) and American oak. Vineyard planted in 2007. Adobe de Guadalupe's Chilean winemaker Daniel Lonnerberg makes it for a single varietal specialist. Malbec is just starting to be planted in the valley but it's growing in popularity. 5,000 cases. Owner from Tijuana. Own vineyards - 2 ha of Malbec. Very independent.*
Mid smudgy ruby. Tarry, pungent nose. Starts very sweet and then gets a bit rusty nails on the end. The nose is the best thing about this wine. Alcohol is well managed. Sufficiently refreshing. But not that much follow-through. Drink 2016-2020
15.5
- Estacion, Porvenir 2014 Valle de Guadalupe *Petite Sirah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Barbera. Aged for six months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1973.*
Bright crimson. Well melded even though it's less than three years old. A light medicinal/tarry note. Lots of freshness and a bit of salinity. Lots to chew on and appetising. Some lift. 'Not a serious geek wine', says Thomas the winemaker. Drink 2017-2020
16
- Firmamento, 5 Estrellas 2011 Valle de Guadalupe *Tempranillo, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache, Cinsault. Aged for 12 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 2002. A D'Acosta project with five partners.*
Warm, baked and medicinal note on the nose - again, well melded. Fresh yet with lots of fruit and zest. Really racy and lively. Almost spindly, which one does not expect! Fully evolved. Why is this 2011 still available, I wonder? Drink 2015-2019
16.5

- **Garza, Amado IV 2011** Valle de Guadalupe Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo, Merlot, Zinfandel. Aged for 12 months in French oak. Vineyard planted in 1999. Owned by a builder's merchant turned vigneron and architect.

Hint of drains but then very sweet luscious fruit. Lots of tannin. Quite ambitious. Lots of drive. Sweet and dusty. More youthful than most despite the vintage! Very clean. Drink 2018-2023

16.5
- **Garza, El Sombrero 2011** Valle de Guadalupe Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Grenache, Carignan, Tempranillo. Aged for 30 months in French oak. Vineyard planted in 1995.

High VA, almost porty. Very sweet. Plus a lot of tannins. Not balanced. Extreme rather than sophisticated. Drink 2018-2020

15.5
- **Lechuza Nebbiolo 2013** Valle de Guadalupe Aged for 24 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 2005.

Dark purple, doesn't look at all like Piemontese Nebbiolo. Bit of oak and alcohol on the nose. Rather syrupy start with some floral notes. Thick and sweet - easy to like because concentrated but not very pure. Drink 2015-2019

16
- **La Lomita, Pagano 2014** Valle de Guadalupe Grenache. Aged for 11 months in American oak. Vineyard planted in 1977.

Dark ruby. Very alluring fresh yet sweet nose with lovely richness and some structure. Great appeal for now and the future. Sappy with a little bit of tobacco leaf for interest. Good energy and transparency. Drink 2016-2021

17
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton Sauvignon Blanc 2016** Valle de Guadalupe Tank sample. Special vineyard in San Vicente. 48-year-old vines on clay belonging to Lulu's uncle (Lulu being Lourdes Martínez-Ojeda, the winemaker).

Pale green. Very intense and quite broad and fresh. Rather French! Very different from most of the valley wines. Lots of personality. Chewy and more intense than most. Lots to chew on. Drink 2017-2018

15.5
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton Chenin Blanc 2016** Valle de Guadalupe Santo Tomás vineyard, 60-year-old vines. We don't add water or more than 1 g/l acid.' People now copying them.

Tight and very slightly tense and again, pretty mainstream. Hint of damp straw. Off-dry impression. Drink 2017-2019

16
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton, Centenario Chenin Blanc 2016** Valle de Guadalupe 100-year-old vines from Santo Tomás. Still on lees. Barrel fermentation with 80% new oak.

Deep straw. Slightly salty to me! Broad and a bit heavy and oaky. Too young to judge. Drink ??

??
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton Sauvignon Blanc 2015** Valle de Guadalupe 300 cases, now released - all in Mexico.

Pale greenish straw. Strongly floral nose. Makes me think of yeast. Powerful and pungent. Strong and very chewy. Lightly beery, quite pinched on the end. I can see that this will go very well in Mexico. Lemon-barley water. Drink 2017-2018

16
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton Chenin Blanc 2015** Valle de Guadalupe They harvested half of the normal crop level thanks to heatwave - it went from 28 °C to 52 °C in a day. Lost up to 100% of grapes - 80% in this Santo Tomás vineyard.

Edge of excitement and tension. Lots of chew. Fades quite fast. Drink 2016-2019

16

- **Bodegas Henri Lurton, Centenario Chenin Blanc 2015** Valle de Guadalupe Barrel fermentation, 100% new oak.
Deep straw. Broad and honeyed and interesting. Very slightly sour but definitely Chenin with masses of acidity. Some skin contact. Bone dry. Drink 2017-2021
16.5
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton Nebbiolo 2015** Valle de Guadalupe Real Nebbiolo brought from Mercier by Peynaud (for Domecq) to San Vicente - so why entry level? Because Henri Lurton thought the tannins not suave enough. 14 months in 100% new oak, but that will go down to 50%. They know it doesn't make sense for an entry level wine. Picked six weeks before some others in that vineyard.
Very dark crimson. Very pure, vital, top-quality red bordeaux on the nose. Round and suave and very fruity. Not at all Piemontese in terms of fruit flavour but very round tannins and just a little bit of grip on the end. Very chewy end. Will be about 250 pesos/\$12.50. Odd! Not sure it's positioned correctly... This is serious wine! 14.5% Drink 2018-2023
16.5
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton, Reserva Syrah 2015** Valle de Guadalupe Barrel sample. 100% new oak. Correct and leathery New World Syrah aromas. Lots of tannin. Bright and peppery and with masses of ripe fruit. Very youthful. Drink 2020-2025
16.5+
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton, Reserva Cabernet Sauvignon 2015** Valle de Guadalupe To be bottled in September 2017 after 24 months of ageing. Henri Lurton didn't want to make Cabernet but this was next to the Nebbiolo plot. Just the third year. 100% new oak again. Will be around \$25-30 in Mexico. More in US.
Very fresh and direct on the nose. Masses of tannin and really very dramatic! Hint of iron filings. Red pimento aromas. Awfully youthful but very promising. Drink 2021-2027
17
- **Bodegas Henri Lurton, Boheme 2015** Valle de Guadalupe Boheme = **Bo Henri Lurton Mexico**. 70% 68-year-old Tempranillo from Rincon de Guadalupe, 25% 30-year-old 'Nebbiolo Baja California', 5% Nebbiolo.
Dark crimson. Savoury, balsam, round and complex. Gentle and sweet and relatively calm. Masses of tannins. Should eventually get there! Drink 2020-2026
16.5+
- **Mogor Badan 2014** Valle de Guadalupe Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot. Aged for 12 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1987. Hugo D'Acosta has been consulting here since 2013.
Iron-rich medicinal aromas. Very thick, syrupy start. Then sudden iron/metallic finish. Hard work! Too sweet. Drink 2018-2020
15.5
- **Monte Xanic Chardonnay 2015** Valle de Guadalupe Aged for nine months in French oak. Vineyard planted in 2005. Picked last week of July. Full malolactic fermentation.
Pale golden straw. Broad nose with a light hint of popcorn. Round. Golden and well done. Light and peachy. Drink 2017-2018
15.5+
- **Monte Xanic, Gran Ricardo 2014** Valle de Guadalupe/Valle Ojos Negros Cabernet Sauvignon from Valle de Guadalupe, Merlot and Petit Verdot from Valle Ojos Negros. 18 months in French oak. Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1994, Merlot planted in 2008, Petit Verdot planted in 2010. Spanish winemaker Cristina responsible for this. Some grapes from Valle Ojos Negros are at 600-700 m elevation as opposed to the rest at 250-300 m.
Quite complex tobacco-leaf aromas. Savoury and lively. Smooth and pungent with a lot going on. Dry, savoury finish. Rather distinctive. Very lively. Drink 2018-2023

16.5

- **Las Nubes, Cumulus 2012** Valle de Guadalupe/San Vicente Grenache, Carignan (from Valle de Guadalupe) and Tempranillo from San Vicente. 12 months in French and American oak. Grenache and Carignan planted in 1967, Tempranillo planted in 1977. An ex pupil of Escuelita. 6,000-8,000 cases made.

Very sweet Châteauneuf-like fruit. Rich and round and very opulent. Bring on Ch Rayas! Fully evolved and utterly hedonistic. The merest hint of leather. In your face! Drink 2016-2020

17

- **Las Nubes Nebbiolo 2012** Valle de Guadalupe Aged for 24 months in French oak. Vineyard planted in 2002.

Mid crimson. Could be a long-macerated Piemontese Nebbiolo. Dangerously high VA. Too sweet. Almost as sweet as a Grenache! Drink 2015-2018

15.5

- **Paralelo, Emblema 2016** Valle de Guadalupe Sauvignon Blanc. Aged in inox. Vineyard planted in 1973.

Smells a bit heavy, as though the perfume is struggling to escape. Quite full bodied with good acidity but not that much varietal character. Fades pretty fast. Drink 2017

15

- **Paralelo, Ensemble Arenal 2013** Valle de Guadalupe Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Barbera. Aged for 12 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1973. Mainly Merlot and Cabernet on sand on the flat part of the valley.

Loose and sweet and accessible on the nose. More intense nose than the clay bottling. Slightly green vegy nose but compensated for by the rich, almost syrupy palate. Big and bold and forward. Almost rude and gamey. Drink 2016-2019

16

- **Paralelo, Ensemble Colina 2013** Valle de Guadalupe Mainly Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, with some Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, and Barbera, all on clay hillsides. Aged for 12 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1973. Same price as the Arenal sandy bottling. More mineral notes on the nose. Seems a little saltier than the Arenal and more lifted and fresher. More of a future but some strong iron-rich notes. Drink 2017-2029

16.5

- **Casa de Piedra, Piedra de Sol 2016** Valle de Guadalupe Chardonnay. Aged in inox. Vineyard planted in 1998. Picked on acid 20-25 July in a very warm year. No malolactic fermentation. Pale straw. Fresh, crisp, recognisable Chardonnay on the nose. Spring flowers, excellent acid balance, but just a tad simple. If I lived here, I might pounce on this but in the great wide world, it might be easy to overlook. Well made though. Super-clean and frisky. Very refreshing. Drink 2017-2018

15.5+

- **Casa de Piedra, Vino de Piedra 2013** Valle de Guadalupe 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 50% Tempranillo. Aged for 13 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1973. Sweet and luscious but a bit too hedonistic, arguably. Lots of ripeness and alcohol. Velvety. Then some iron filings and tannins. Drink 2018-2022

16

- **Casa de Piedra, 15 Cosechas 2011** Valle de Guadalupe 53% Cabernet Sauvignon, 47% Tempranillo. Aged for 14 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1973. A 15th anniversary blend (barrel selection).

Sweet start then very savoury with polished tannins. Arguably slightly sickly and pretty diffuse on the end. Awkward finish. Drink 2017-2020

16

- **Casa de Piedra, Contraste Intercontinental 2010** International From Mexico, Valle de

Guadalupe: Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon. Vineyards planted in 1973. From France, Lesquerde in Roussillon: Carignan, Grenache, Syrah. Vineyards planted in 1963. 12 months in French and American oak. Hugo bought a vineyard in Roussillon in 2007. Wine transported from Barcelona to Ensenada.

Very lively and fresh – more acidity than any of the wines we have tasted so far. Finishes a bit suddenly – a bit pinched and definitely chewy. Carignan influence? Drink 2017-2019

16

- **Tres Valles, Kojáa 2013 Valle de Guadalupe***Petite Sirah. Aged for 12 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1973. Mexican owner started in 2001 after Santo Tomás generation. This is one of the few monovarietal wines.*
Deep purplish crimson. Light, very ripe elderberry nose. Noticeably salty start. Sweet and salt! Almost like fermented treacle toffee! Some tannins. An extreme wine. Drink 2017-2020
15.5
- **Tres Valles, Maat 2013 San Vicente***Grenache. 15 months in French and American oak. Vineyard planted in 1982.*
Dark crimson. Bit oxidised on the nose – not fresh but syrupy. Very heavy. This would not be suitable for export. Drink 2015-2017
14
- **Vena Cava Sauvignon Blanc 2016** *Valle de Guadalupe**Just 80% Sauvignon Blanc with some Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay and Viognier. Just bottled.*
Big and bold. Full of character and earthiness. Lots of personality. Some guava but thick like pear juice. Lots of interest. Relatively low acidity but bags of character. Phil Gregory actively avoids citrus character so picks at two different ripeness levels. A truly interesting wine. 13.6% Drink 2017-2018
16
- **Vena Cava, Vino Blanco Natural 2016 Valle de Guadalupe***50% Chardonnay, 50% Chenin Blanc. No sulphites at all and no filtration or stabilisation. 75 cases. A natural wine.*
A tad stinky on the nose. Broad and rich on the palate. Fun and fresh, lively and appley and full of life. Hint of ginger. Fairly rich. Drink 2017-2018
16.5
- **Vena Cava, Ambar 2016 Valle de Guadalupe***100% Chardonnay, half fermented in plastic tank and half in old barrels. Skin, seed and some stem contact. Aged for four months in new American oak. Already had to allocate this!*
Lots of skins and pretty sour. Finishes pretty suddenly. Too little fruit for me (compared with something like the Cullen Amber). Drink 2017
15.5
- **Vena Cava, Clarete Cabernet Franc 2016** *Valle de Guadalupe**Fermented and briefly aged in barrel.*
Perfumed. Sweet start and then super-fruity. Relatively mainstream. Fine tannins on the end. Good wine served cool. Drink 2017-2018
16
- **Vena Cava, Rosado 2016 Valle de Guadalupe***Unoaked, 50% Syrah, 50% Grenache.*
Fresh and slightly sticky and heavy and sweet. Definitely for food rather than refreshment. Drink 2017
15.5
- **Vena Cava Cabernet Sauvignon 2014** *Valle de Guadalupe**Blend of about 20 different parcels. 2,800 bottles.*
Deep crimson. Scented and clean, direct and very varietal. Then a strong terroir effect on the finish. Very pure and lively. Dry end and very appetising and not at all syrupy. 13.6% Drink 2017-2021

17

- **Vena Cava Tempranillo 2014** Valle de Guadalupe *Mostly from San Vicente, some 35- to 55-year-old vines.*
Dark blackish crimson. A very true varietal nose and then a bit rusty on the end. Very fresh and no syrup. Just a hint of acetic but noble. Dusty tannins on the end. 13.4% Drink 2018-2020
16
- **Vena Cava, Big Blend 2014** Valle de Guadalupe *25% Syrah (from just south of Ensenada), 25% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Petite Sirah and 17% Zinfandel (from Hugo D'Acosta in Guadalupe), 14% Grenache (from Ojos Negros perhaps?). By his third year he was making blends with confidence and perforce because of his purchases.*
Very winning and fresh. Lively. Tight grainy finish. 13.8% Drink 2017-2021
17
- **Vena Cava, Hic et Nunc 2014** Valle de Guadalupe *50% Grenache (2014), 25% Syrah (2014), 25% Mourvèdre (2013); specially bottled as house wine for chef Enrique Olvera (of Pujol and Cosme) from barrels Phil Gregory particularly likes.*
Aged ruby colour. Lifted and frisky on the nose. Both meaty and sweet. Great freshness and life. Real punch. Quite a bit of funky tannin. Not as complete as some. Drink 2017-2019
16
- **Vena Cava, Reserve 2012** Valle de Guadalupe *66% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Syrah (last vintage).*
Blackish ruby. Intensely terroir - much riper than the other wines in this collection. Very dusty and perhaps less thoroughly satisfying than the more recent vintages. 13.8% Drink 2016-2019
16
- **Vinisterra, Pedregal 2012** Valle de Guadalupe *Syrah and Mourvèdre. Aged for 18 months in French oak. Vineyard planted in 2002. Made by Christoph Gärtner. The vineyard is on the coolish, high-elevation entrance to the valley. 50% new French oak. Some bottle age.*
Rather decadent and fun. Sweet tart. Refined and lively. Appetising. Drink 2015-2020
16.5
- **Vinisterra Nebbiolo 2012** Valle de Santo Tomás *23 months in French oak. Vineyard planted in 2007. Christoph Gärtner's rather superior operation in San Antonio de la Minas.*
Dark purple, doesn't look at all like Piemontese Nebbiolo. But there is some Nebbiolo-like spice on the nose. And also some freshness. Like Nebbiolo concentrate with some freshness and tar. Very dry and tannic on the end at the moment but there is no shortage of ambition. Drink 2019-2025
16.5
- **Vinsur, Cañada de los Encinos 2014** Valle de Guadalupe/San Vicente *12 months in American oak. Zinfandel from Guadalupe planted in 1973, Petit Verdot from San Vicente planted in 2007. Made by Adobe de Guadalupe's Chilean winemaker Daniel Lonnberg. 80% Zinfandel.*
Bright fruit. Then sweet and salt on the palate. Fairly chewy still - quite youthful. Finishes just a bit tough. Wait? Drink 2018-2021
15.5