

INNOVATORS

At the Frontier of Winemaking, a New Talent Leads the Way

In Mexico's Baja region, the Bordeaux-trained winemaker Lourdes Martinez Ojeda crafts wines that establish her homeland as vital to the global culinary stage

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Lulu Martinez Ojeda. Photo courtesy of Lulu Martinez Ojeda.

Awarded for: A decade in Bordeaux taught Lourdes Martinez Ojeda how to make some of the world's most respected wine; now she applies the experience to introduce a vibrant, fresh style to her native Baja California, Mexico.

For Lourdes “Lulu” Martinez Ojeda, working as a winemaker in Baja California, Mexico, brings her story full circle. She grew up among the vines at her great-grandmother’s vineyard in Baja but left to study viticulture and enology in France. In pursuing her career, it looked at first as though she’d stay abroad. For a decade, Martinez Ojeda worked in Bordeaux as part of the winemaking team at [Château Brane-Cantenac](#) in Margaux—Henri Lurton’s Grand Cru Classé estate.

But in 2014, Lurton decided to open a winery in Mexico: [Bodegas Henri Lurton](#) in Ensenada. He didn’t have to look far for talent, as Martinez Ojeda was a perfect fit for the job of winemaker. Fast-forward a few years, and Martinez Ojeda now makes wines in the Valle de Guadalupe, to growing critical and commercial acclaim, as her bottles find an international audience at restaurants like The French Laundry, in Napa, California, and Topolobampo, in Chicago.



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Bringing Bordeaux to Baja

Mexico's Baja California Norte area is home to the Valle de Guadalupe, where Martinez Ojeda is a crucial figure in a winemaking and tourism renaissance. That Lurton chose this spot to expand his wine business is significant, and that he tapped Martinez Ojeda for the lead winemaking role points to her ability to combine Baja authenticity with Bordeaux know-how. It's a unique approach, but as Martinez Ojeda says, "Baja is everything except traditional."

When she returned to Baja, Martinez Ojeda not only worked with Lurton but held a handful of consulting gigs; now, however, she's narrowed her focus. In 2019 she accepted a full-time position as director of winemaking at the Alejandro D'Acosta–designed [Bruma Valle de Guadalupe](#), a winery and resort northeast of Ensenada that features an eight-suite inn and one of the region's top restaurants, [Fauna](#). She also maintains a single consulting gig, at [Palafox](#) winery in the nearby Valle de la Grulla.

Martinez Ojeda's wines “stand out for their refinement, natural high acidity, and balance,” says Susan VanKoughnett, the president of [Bodin Street Wines & Spirits](#), a distributor and importer in Chicago. “They are very authentic, highlighting the unique terroir and character of the region, but also quite sophisticated. I think it's the Bordeaux training.”

This combination of influences balances Martinez Ojeda's wines. “Lulu is part of a generation that brought life experience back to Baja,” says Tom Bracamontes, the founder of [La Competencia Imports](#), a Napa-based importer, distributor, and wholesaler of wines from Baja. “She's only been back for five years, but she's helping to raise expectations, to think differently about when to pick,” says Bracamontes. “Stylistically, this is a significant change.”

Developing Her Own Voice

In a winemaking frontier, relatively speaking, and unbound by Bordeaux regulations that might tend to “limit inventiveness and evolution,” Martinez Ojeda has been free to pursue her own interests, experimenting freely with grapes and winemaking techniques.

VanKoughnett counts Martinez Ojeda as one among a small set of “young, exciting new winemakers” who are willing to experiment “with all kinds of varieties—not necessarily the ones you would consider for the region.” With more than 100 varieties planted in Baja, and no vineyard regulations, Martinez Ojeda has a wide field from which to pick and choose the grapes and styles that will appeal to consumers worldwide.

But it’s her attention to terroir and her deft technique—picking earlier to retain acidity, for example—that have brought her wines international acclaim. “I’m always one of the first to harvest,” says Martinez Ojeda. “I like freshness, complexity, acidity.”



Photo courtesy of Lulu Ojeda Martinez.

Finding Success in the U.S. Market

Martinez Ojeda's U.S. partners confirm that her bottles are an asset to their clients' programs. VanKoughnett says Martinez Ojeda is "massively qualified to produce world-class food wines to be served in Michelin-starred restaurants and the best neighborhood, chef-driven accounts."

Martinez Ojeda crafts her wines especially to be experienced at the dinner table. "Cuisine has democratized Baja," she says. "It once was a microcosm, but cuisine has helped us a lot in the wine industry. It's fundamental."



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Martinez Ojeda's attention to the culinary scene has been crucial to her success, and she credits the U.S. market, particularly the chefs Rick Bayless and Thomas Keller, for being ambassadors for her wine and the Baja experience in general. Her bottles have been on the menu at Bayless's Chicago restaurants [Frontera Grill](#), [Leña Brava](#), and [Topolobampo](#); Keller's fine-dining temple [The French Laundry](#) in Napa; the upscale Mexican restaurant [Sazón](#) in Santa Fe; the modern international [Chaak Kitchen](#) in Tustin, California; and [Kinzie Chophouse](#), a steakhouse in Chicago—to name a few.

Bracamontes, the importer of Baja wines, credits the region's growing reputation to creative people like Martinez Ojeda, who he says works “on a different level.” She has been critical to Baja's jump from a novelty or tourist attraction to a distinctive element of North America's wine landscape, he says, noting that he now imports to 22 U.S. markets.

Adds VanKoughnett, “Our wine buyers, sommeliers, and chefs love to taste these wines and are often very surprised at the high quality and the versatility with food.”

Jill Barth is a wine writer and journalist and a Fellowship award winner of the Symposium for Professional Wine Writers. Her work has been published by Forbes.com, USA Today, Wine Enthusiast, Decanter, France-

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