

# Why Mexican Wine Is No Longer a Restaurant Novelty

By Caroline Hatchett



Adobe Guadalupe in Baja California, Mexico / Photo by KS

Growing up in Mazatlán, a town in the state of Sinaloa on the Pacific coast of Mexico, Luis Arce Mota would watch his father and friends share a bucket of boiled shrimp while drinking small bottles of Pacifico to fend off the heat.

“It was beer, beer, beer,” says Arce Mota, owner/chef of [La Contenta](#) and [La Contenta Oeste](#) in New York City. “Everything in Mexico is about class. Beer is for the people, the proletariat.”

Arce Mota did not grow up with wine, nor do a majority of Mexican immigrants to America. "The Mexicans in the United States are the people who couldn't make it back home," he says. "It's hard work growing corn, especially when you make \$10 a day. We don't have access to jobs or education in Mexico. You have to [emigrate], work as a dishwasher and grow from there."

Arce Mota arrived in the United States in the early 1990s and started his hospitality career in the dish pit of [Carmine's Italian Restaurant](#) in Times Square. He worked for chefs like David Bouley, Michael Lomonaco, Michael Romano and César Ramirez.

Arce Mota's wine education was informal, gradual and disconnected from the Mexican cuisine he cooked until he rediscovered wines from Valle de Guadalupe in Baja Mexico.

Now, at La Contenta, he offers arguably the only wine list in America comprised exclusively of Mexican wines.



*Luis Arce Mota, owner/chef, La Contenta and La Contenta Oeste, New York City / Photo by Lisa Kaplowitz*

## When did Mexico start producing wine?

For most American wine drinkers, Mexican wine appeared seemingly out of nowhere. One day, we were content drinking Tecate, margaritas and mezcal, and the next, sommeliers were pouring tastes of Tempranillo-Nebbiolo blends that showed big fruit and a touch of sea salt.

Mexican winemaking is not new. It's been practiced since Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés was said to have brought the [Mission](#) grape (now known to be Listán Prieto) to the Americas in the 16th century. Jesuit and Dominican priests established vineyards at missions along the Pacific Coast in Mexico, just as they did in California. Unfortunately, [phylloxera](#), the Mexican Revolution and staggering inequality were not kind to the nascent



wine industry.

*"In the music world, you can always feel a hit record developing, especially when you start getting calls from the middle of the country. I'm getting that exact feeling with Mexican wines." —Tom Bracamontes, founder, La Competencia Imports*

On the Baja peninsula, just south of San Diego, there were a handful of holdout producers. Arce Mota remembers trying bottles from [L.A. Cetto](#) and [Pedro Domecq](#) during the 1980s, but wasn't impressed with the quality at the time.

"Until eight to 10 years ago, wines of Baja weren't good," says Lawrence Becerra, owner of fine-dining Mexican restaurant [Sazón](#) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "Their techniques and equipment were antiquated, the water was dirty and the wines had a high saline quality. Then, good winemakers came in, used clean water and chose grapes for terroir."

Jill Gubesch, the longtime wine director for chef Rick Bayless' [Frontera](#) restaurant group, initially experienced Mexican wine in 2001 on her first trip to the country.

"The only wines available to us were from a small local wine shop," she says. "They had been sitting in the heat, and the vintages were out of date... so you can imagine the kind of shape they were in."

She didn't give up on the wines, though. After visiting Valle de Guadalupe, Gubesch staged a winemaker dinner with [Casa de Piedra](#) and [Adobe Guadalupe](#) wineries. She managed to get a few selections imported for her wine lists at [Frontera Grill](#) and [Topolobampo](#).





*Topolovino Baja being served at Leña Brava / Photo by Arthur Mullen*

## Mexican wine in restaurants today

Eighteen years later, Gubesch features up to 48 Mexican selections on her lists at [Leña Brava](#), [Frontera Grill](#) and [Topolobampo](#). She now has a large enough selection and supply of Mexican wines to pair with all five courses of Topolobampo's tasting menu, her biggest seller.

The popularity of Mexican cuisine in America along with rising quality has created growing demand for the country's wines. And largely, Tom Bracamontes is responsible for the supply. His [La Competencia Imports](#) represents around 20 wineries from Valle de Guadalupe, and he supplies, on average, 10% of their wine output to the United States.

Bracamontes founded La Competencia Imports in 2015 after working in the music industry and, later, spending nearly a decade in marketing for Napa's [Mi Sueño Winery](#). "I needed something more exciting than a \$150 bottle of Cabernet," he says.

*"They're our neighbors, for chrissakes. To me, it makes perfect sense to include Baja wines in an American restaurant." —Lawrence Becerra, owner, Sazón*

When Bracamontes visited Valle de Guadalupe, he found all the trappings of a great New World wine region with great food and hospitality, despite water and infrastructure issues. He, as well as sommeliers and winemakers, are particularly attracted to the lack of rules and standardization in the Mexican wine industry. There are no regulations or governing boards telling producers where to grow [Chenin Blanc](#) or that they can't blend Italian and Spanish grape varieties.

The region has a handful of exceptional winemakers, several of whom make wines for multiple brands.

"I think of them as Dr. Dre or Pharrell," says Bracamontes. "I want to find the winemakers or producers who are making great wine—or hit records—for more than one person."

Among that lauded group are Daniel Lonnberg ([Adobe Guadalupe](#), [Hacienda Guadalupe](#), [Hilo Negro](#), [Literal](#), [Canada de los Encinos](#) and [Emevé](#)); Alberto Rubio ([Fluxus](#), [Bodegas F. Rubio](#) and [La Trinidad](#)) and Lourdes "Lulu" Martinez Ojeda ([Bruma](#), [Palafox](#) and [Bodegas Henri Lurton](#)).

Camillo Magoni's winery, [Bodegas Magoni](#), represents the progress made by the valley's longtime winemakers.

"[Camillo] Magoni has been making wine in Valle de Guadalupe for more than 50 years and experiments with [over 100] different grape varieties," says Gubesch. "He's definitely the OG of Valle."



*Cosme and its beverage director, Yana Volfson / Photo courtesy ATM Group*

At [Cosme](#) in New York City, Beverage Director Yana Volfson works with [Vena Cava](#) winemaker Phil Gregory to make the restaurant's house red, or Tinto de la Casa. It's a blend of Merlot and Cabernet Franc and sells for \$25 per glass. Cosme has worked with Gregory since its launch in 2014, and Volfson says the wine pairs particularly well with smoky dishes like ayocote bean purée and lamb tacos.

"It's a fuller-bodied wine that responds well to spice," says Volfson. "There's a hugging minerality that works with chiles, rubs and mole."



## A wealth of pairing opportunities for Mexico's wines

To state the obvious, Mexican wine and food pair beautifully. At Yucatan-inspired [Chaak Kitchen](#) in Tustin, California, owner Ed Patrick suggests [Roganto's](#) Piccolo, a red blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo, Cabernet Franc and Merlot that would pair well with the restaurant's 11-hour smoked *cochinita pibil*. Meanwhile, Gubesch is currently pouring the [Bodegas de Santo Tomás](#) 2016 Blanca México with uni tostadas. Made from the Mission grape, the wine "is little funky with a fino Sherry-like nose and a savory freshness reminiscent of the sea," she says.

At La Contenta Oeste, a 2015 [Santos Brujos](#) Tempranillo adds a lovely fruit top note to the tomatoes, olives, raisins and plantains in Arce Mota's branzino Veracruz. Need to pair corn and tomatoes? Try the Bodegas Henri Lurton Chenin Blanc.

"It makes people's hearts melt to eat *queso fundido* with a Mexican red wine," says Eric Jefferson, general manager of [La Calenda](#) in Napa.

Mexican wine sales thrive in metropolitan markets on the East and West Coasts, generally at higher-end Mexican restaurants, but they can fill niches on most wine lists. At Philadelphia's meat-centric [Southern Kensington Quarters](#), sommelier Megan Storm pours [Bichi](#) wines, made in Tecate. For Jeff Harding, beverage director at [Waverly Inn](#) in New York City, Baja is represented right alongside Bordeaux. "If you like California wine, you'll like Baja wine," says Harding. "It's fruit-forward and immediately accommodating. These wines are friendly right away."

Becerra says Mexican wines can perform well with any American cuisine.

"They're our neighbors, for chrissakes," he says. "To me, it makes perfect

sense to include Baja wines in an American restaurant."



*The wines of Viñedo Llano Colorado, Baja California / Photos by Cintia Soto*

## Finding a home in the finest restaurants in America

At The French Laundry, located in the heart of American winemaking in Napa, Head Sommelier Erik Johnson includes 14 Baja wines on his expansive 2,500-label list. As a 21-year-old who just passed both his Level 1 and Level 2 sommelier certifications, Johnson had an unusually early exposure to Mexican wines. While working at a resort in Arizona in 2008, he tasted wines like Grenache from Baja instead of the Rhône.

Johnson and his boss, Thomas Keller, both have a soft spot for Mexican wines.

“Our list is a representation of benchmark producers from around the world, an encyclopedic gathering of regions and producers that tell a story of where they’re coming from,” says Johnson. “That’s the uniqueness of this restaurant. It provides an environment, where if you want to learn about wine, you can. Mexican wines offer an extra level of versatility.”

Selling Mexican wine to a captive and sometimes California-wine-fatigued audience, has been relatively straightforward for Johnson and Jefferson.



### *Filipino Sommeliers and the Western Bias in Wine Tasting*

At Empellón in New York City, Corporate Beverage Director Noah Small, highlights seven Mexican selections featured prominently on the menu. “If I had to pick just one category of red wine, it would be bottles from Mexico,” says Small, who plans to soon double the Mexican labels available. In a neighborhood dominated by lawyers, bankers and Cabernet, Small’s best-selling bottle is a \$110 Tempranillo-Nebbiolo blend from Corona del Valle.

Arce Mota has had three groups of diners walk out of the restaurant when they realized the wine list is all Mexican, but increasingly, people come in just to experience the wines. Two guests recently bought two \$96 bottles from Fluxus after having tried the wine at an upscale restaurant in Mexico.

In Napa, a bottle of Mexican wine on the French Laundry list can feel like a steal.

“How cool is it that you can go from the tasting rooms at Opus and Harlan and then try something you haven’t had before, a wine from Mexico?” asks



Johnson. "A \$150 bottle blows you away."

Mexican wine may overdeliver for diners used to paying \$100 or more for a bottle, but it's far from entry-level.

"Mexico does not produce two-buck José," says Bracamontes.



*A selection of Baja wines / Photo by Cintia Soto*

## The challenges in getting Mexican wine to U.S. restaurants

The country doesn't manufacture any significant amount of corks, capsules or labels, which generally have to be imported from the United States or Europe. A lack of warehousing and transportation infrastructure often thwarts exports outside Baja. Further complicating matters, winemakers

sign grape contracts in U.S. dollars, which constitutes a considerable premium against the Mexican peso.

Most critically, there's a serious lack of water in the region, which affects quality at lesser houses and quantity for the whole peninsula. Though wineries and export numbers have increased in Valle de Guadalupe, annual production has stalled at 2 million cases for the last decade, says Bracamontes.

That problem may be addressed soon. Vintners and estate owners have banded together to finance a water pipeline that could deliver enough reclaimed water from Tijuana to irrigate up to 25,000 acres. Valle de Guadalupe has almost 5,000 acres of grapes planted, and there are more than 10,000 acres of vineyards in greater Baja.

"The pipelines are actually being set," says Jaime Palafox Granados, owner of Aldo Palafox Vinos y Viñedos and president of Baja California wine producers' association. "We could provide water for those vines planted already and [perhaps triple] plantings."

Palafox, Bracamontes and longtime producer Tru Miller of Adobe Guadalupe believe the pipeline could make growers' lives a little easier while improving quality and lowering prices. With that, name recognition could increase. Napa growers have used wastewater as irrigation for years.

Others are more cautious. "I think you have to respect nature sometimes, and maybe not source water from other places," says Volfson. "We've learned from history that you develop better-quality juice when you find ways to reduce production. There is opportunity and this wonderful interest in making more wine, but at what cost does that come?"



*A bright future for Mexican wine in America / Getty*

## What does the future hold for Mexican wine in America?

The next few years will be important for the Mexican wine industry. Young, homegrown winemakers like Lulu Martinez Ojeda are on the lips of sommeliers across the U.S. Sales are up in Mexico, fueled by high-end dining in Mexico City and at resorts.

"I don't think we've hit inflection point yet," says Bracamontes. "In the music world, you can always feel a hit record developing, especially when you start getting calls from the middle of the country. I'm getting that exact feeling with Mexican wines."



He's begun to investigate the possibility to import wine from Coahuila, Guanajuato, San Miguel de Allende, Querétaro and Aguascalientes.

For Arce Mota, to serve Mexican wine is personal. He's proud of a product made in his home country. He's excited to share it with his guests. And as Mexican wine becomes more popular, he hopes that it will create a few more quality jobs back home.

"All the Mexican wines I can get, I will carry," says Arce Mota. "We put them out into the market so people will know about them. For me, now that I understand, I want every Mexican restaurant to serve at least one Mexican wine."