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# onAir



## Food & Drink

### Baja wine country

By Adam Skolnick



LA VILLA DEL VALLE

Baja's spectacular beaches practically scream for cerveza but, as I rode along the sinuous road that hugs the cliffs south of Tijuana, I was looking forward to the wine I'd enjoy upon my arrival. I'd recently heard about La Villa del Valle, a new inn owned by a Hollywood

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producer gone AWOL in the Guadalupe Valley – an up-and-coming wine region just south of the U.S. border, a short drive from San Diego. This trip would be all about vino.



### The wine route

Wine is not exactly new to Baja. What is now La Ruta del Vino was once a migratory route for Spanish missionaries. The monks planted vineyards near the mission, cultivated and crushed grapes and got drunk on sugar-sweet red wine. But it wasn't until the 1990s that Mexican wine started to compete with the best international vintages.



I had my first glass after arriving at [La Villa del Valle](#), a palatial yet earthy Tuscan-style B&B accented with colourful local art. The last few kilometres on a rutted dirt road had given me, and my Honda hybrid, the shakes. Nothing a little Grenache couldn't cure. This was Phil's Grenache. Phil and Eileen Gregory own La Villa del Valle, and after just over a year in the valley, Phil had already bottled a vintage. It had a certain brashness that would become familiar over the next few days. We enjoyed it with an incredible dinner of shrimp carpaccio drizzled in chili oil and mako filet in mole sauce.

### Eclectic vinters

The next day, Eileen, the former movie producer, led me on a tour of her favourite wineries. "I'm excited for you to meet the people here," she said. "They are the most fantastic people I've ever met." It didn't take long to see her point. Scattered among the Guadalupe Valley's patchwork of vineyards, interspersed with scrub brush and boulder fields and surrounded by stunning mountain views, is a vibrant community of oceanographers, architects, artists and chefs who are all diving into second careers as winemakers.



EILEEN AND PHIL GREGORY



Consider Antonio Badan, a tenured professor and global-warming researcher at the University of Baja California, who started making wine on the ranch where he was born 20 years ago. He uses a sustainable approach to create **Mogor Badan's** cab franc. His cattle fertilize the vines. Eggs from his chickens clarify it, and the limestone cellar where the wine is aged is built underground and remains cool naturally. Even in the fierce August heat, his cellar hovers at 16°C. Over time it will come down to 12, the optimum temperature.

Like most of the region's reds, his cab franc is bold and full-flavoured with earthy overtones. Due to a lack of rain and high soil pH, Guadalupe Valley is a special place for rich reds, which are almost always blends because the fruit is often stressed and acidic. Badan prunes his vines severely and ages the wine in French oak barrels. "Oak releases the flavours," says Pau Pijoan, another scientist-(actually, a veterinarian)-turned-winemaker. At his hillside winery, Vinas Pijoan, he poured a fruitier than expected merlot-syrah blend that was one of the smoothest I tasted in the region.



*Mogor Badan Winery, tours and wine tasting by appointment at Rancho El Mogor, 52-646-177-1484*

### Valley flavours

For the most part, however, Guadalupe Valley's finest should be paired with big food lest the hearty reds overwhelm. And that is not a problem here either, whether you're snacking on savoury lamb accented by tart oven-roasted tomatoes and olive-oil sorbet at the valley's original destination restaurant, [Laja](#), enjoying the fine La Villa del Valle dining room or lunching at [Sylvestre](#), a spectacular outdoor restaurant overlooking lush vineyards, where I feasted on fresh Ensenada oysters

and barbecued quail.

At Sylvestre, Eileen and I sat beside a local architect whose recent winery design for **Paralelo**, a large local label, is a rammed-earth, high-design masterpiece that was the last stop on our incredible tour. Yes, the monks are gone, the creatives have arrived and the Guadalupe Valley, once just a dry, landlocked and forgotten corner of Baja, has officially arrived.

Sylvestre, 646-175-7073



Paralelo, 646-155-3097

*(Adam Skolnick writes about travel, culture, adventure and health for Outside, Men's Journal, Spa and Islands Magazine. He wrote about destination clubs in the [November 2006](#) issue.)*

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