

Mexican Crush

A valley of heretofore unknown vineyards is helping establish Baja California as North America's next great food and wine destination

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This page: a view across
the biodynamic vineyard
at Finca La Carrodilla;
opposite page: dinner
at Javier Plascencia's
Finca Altozano



Before the wine, there must be food. That's the rule for Fernando Pérez Castro, owner of **Hacienda La Lomita** winery in Valle de Guadalupe, the region of northern Baja California that in the past few years has put Mexico on the map as a serious wine producer. The rustic roadhouse **La Cocina de Doña Esthela** is his answer for breakfast—one unlike any I've had before.

The owner and cook, Esthela Martínez, her round face glistening from the heat of the clay oven, wedges a platter of *panqueque de elote*—which Pérez Castro describes as “the perfect marriage between a pancake and a

tortilla”—on the table's last vacant spot, between the stewed lamb, shredded beef with eggs, and guava empanadas. “She's going to be speaking English in two years, I promise,” says Pérez Castro with a laugh. “She's already an Instagram star.”

When Pérez Castro and his family opened La Lomita in 2010, finding a good place to eat—let alone one that has tourists snapping photos and writing glowing Yelp reviews—was practically impossible. Now, though, he says, “Young chefs are constructing the identity of the Baja cuisine as we speak, experimenting and using traditions of Mexican cuisine but looking at what's happening in Peru, in San Sebastián, in California. Modern Mexican cuisine may be starting here, in one of the youngest states in Mexico.”

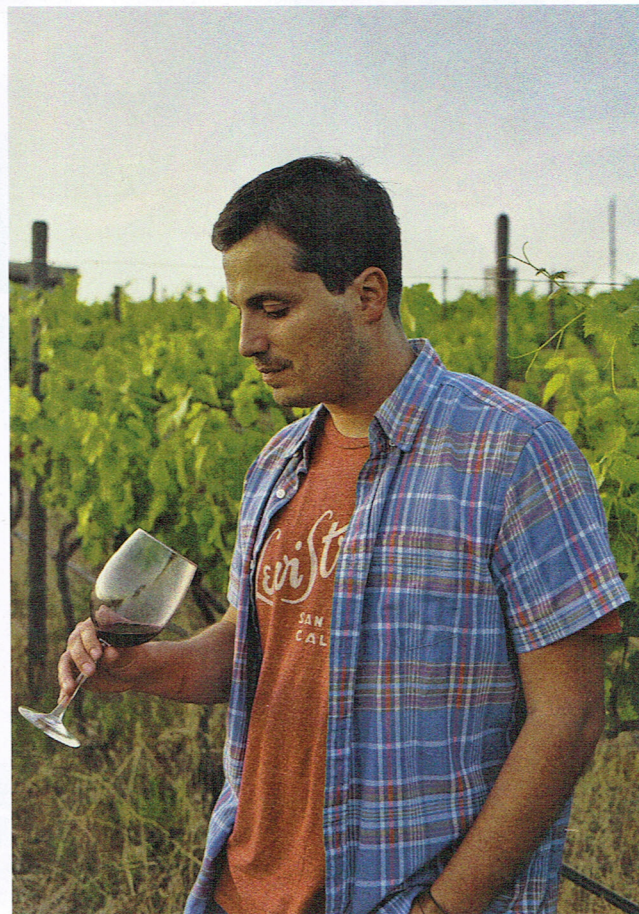
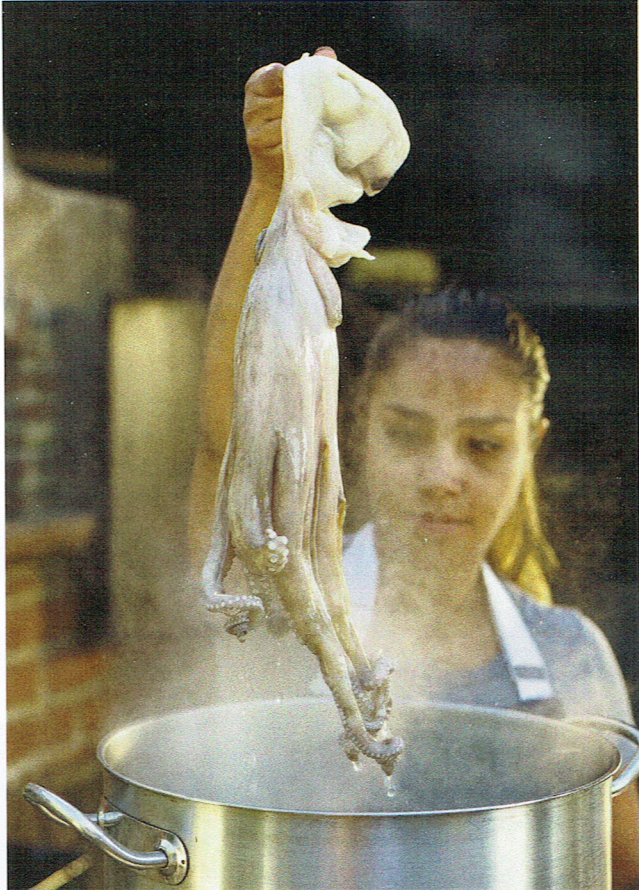
Food scenes commonly crop up in established wine regions. Consider

revitalized McMinnville, in Oregon's Willamette Valley, or Santa Barbara, California, the gateway to the Central Coast's many vineyards. But the Valle, as locals call it, is hardly established—even though the region, about 90-minutes' drive from the border crossing with San Diego, produces 90 percent of Mexico's wines. It's small: about 3,000 acres versus about 45,000 in Napa Valley. And it's young: From about 20 wineries 10 years ago, there are now roughly 100, many of them producing vivid wine but lacking broad distribution, which virtually mandates a tasting visit.

Extolling Doña Esthela's Mexican soul food as we take our last bites of lamb prior to a tasting tour, Pérez Castro promises me an oenophile's bucolic fantasy: “You'll never find big corporate wineries making big wines,” he says. “There's not enough grapes.”



Clockwise from top left:
octopus at TrasLomita; Sheyla Alvarado drops the pulpo in the pot; Hacienda La Lomita owner Fernando Pérez Castro; finishing a dish at TrasLomita; Esthela Martínez at La Cocina de Doña Esthela





This page: the breakfast spread at La Cocina de Doña Esthela; opposite page: an oenophilic equine at Adobe Guadalupe

From my first glance at the pale granite boulders that pile the green valley-girding hills, I'm skeptical that there are any grapes at all. But soon, olive groves, orange orchards, and fields signed "nebbiolo" and "syrah" appear on the curiously rubble-free flats beside the main road that divides the 20-mile-long valley.

Wine has a long, if secondary-to-religion, history in Baja, dating back to 1701, when Spanish Jesuit and later Dominican missionaries cultivated grapes for colonist communions. After the missions were secularized, in 1834, a relatively fallow period ensued, until Russian Christians, fleeing the czar's draft and religious persecution, arrived in 1906 and began pressing wines, cooking borscht, and lending names like Bibayoff to the lanes.

After a morning rain, those lanes are muddy ruts where horses amble without fear of traffic, which is sparse and slowed by the mires. Post-*panqueques*, I head directly to **Adobe Guadalupe**, one of the Valle's pioneering wineries, to test a Pérez Castro prediction: If you don't meet the owner, you will certainly meet his daughter or at least his dog.

"We were number six," declares Tru Miller, owner of Adobe Guadalupe, which was, in fact, the sixth winery established in the region, in 1998. The Dutch native turned Mexican citizen warmly welcomes my surprise visit with a full portfolio tasting. Between the beefy merlot-cab-malbec Gabriel and the Côtes du Rhône-ish blend Kerubiel, she tells me she and her late husband wanted to retire to a vineyard and came to the Valle for bargain land (alas, long gone). So many friends came to visit that she added six rooms to her hacienda-style home and converted it into an inn. "I didn't intend it to be a B&B, but then we needed money to buy bottles," she says with a smile, describing her role at the

inn as a doting aunt who doesn't mind guests poking around. "I like to make money, but I like to make friends more."

Despite its senior standing in the valley, Adobe Guadalupe didn't release its first wine until 2000. In industry terms, nearly everything is young here, including a group of next-gen winemakers championing new ideas, from the biodynamic **Finca La Carrodilla**, where a manure-stuffed horn of a lactating cow is buried seasonally to ensure a good harvest, to **Decantos Vinícola**, my next stop, which is the first winery in Mexico without a pump. The new multistory facility, opened two years ago, descends 36 feet underground, relying on gravity to power the flow from crush to vat to barrel to bottle.

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"You are tasting my thesis: that pumps oxidize wine," says Alonso Granados, Decantos's fervent winemaker, who told his parents he was studying law while he learned the craft in Spain. (They clearly forgave him; during my visit, I meet his father and, yes, his dog).

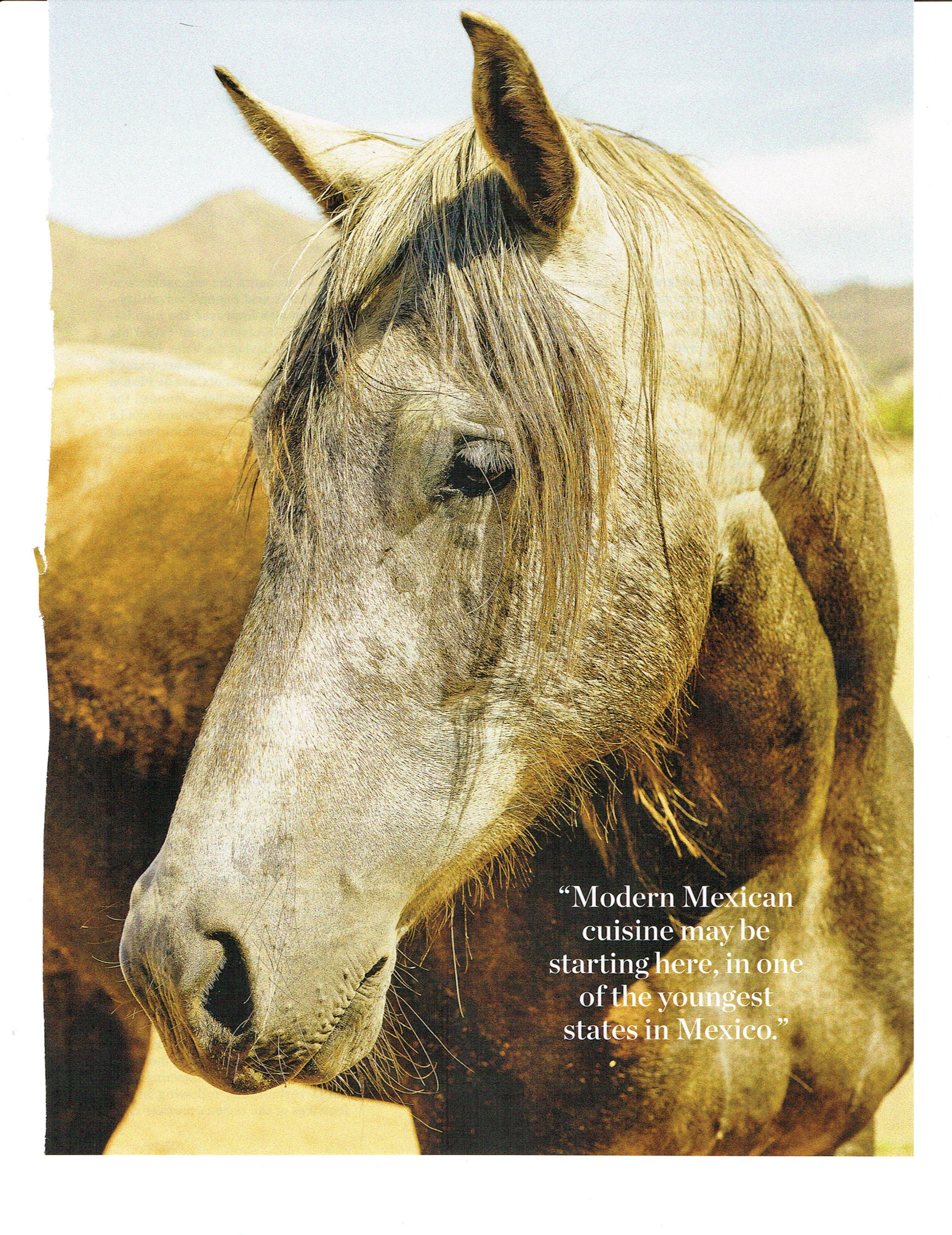
A purist, Granados favors single varietals and is especially fond of tempranillo and nebbiolo, two Mediterranean grapes suited to the Valle's similar climate. But the New World growers here are unbound by convention, even growing Swiss Chasselas grapes or blending tempranillo and cabernet. "Ensenada can give you over 40 different varieties because there are so many microclimates," Granados says.

By all accounts, the winemaker who proved this arid region's versatility—and who also improved the blends—was Hugo D'Acosta, often called the Robert Mondavi of the Valle. In 2004, the Mexican-born, Bordeaux-trained D'Acosta, proprietor of **Casa de Piedra** and other wineries here, founded the Estación de Oficios el Porvenir, aka La Escuelita, or the Little School, training budding vintners who have taken the refractometer and run with it.

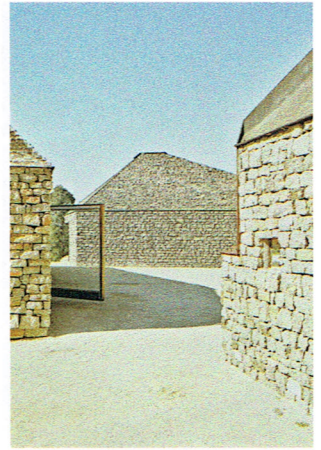
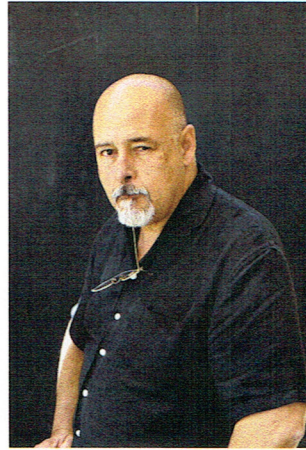
Concurrently, Hugo's brother Alejandro D'Acosta did as much to establish the style of Valle wineries in his signature resourceful-modernist style. At **Vena Cava**, upturned old boats act as ceiling vaults. His design for the three-year-old **Clos de Tres Cantos** resembles a cloister for Earth Day worshippers—the boulders in the cathedral-like cellar are native—and recycled appointments including wine bottles cemented in as stained glass windows. "The idea is to create poetry with garbage," he says, calling the look "emotional architecture."

Clos de Tres Santos has just added two hotel rooms with concrete slab walls and stone floors. Decantos has a hospitality expansion in mind too. Meanwhile, I choose to stay at **Encuentro Guadalupe**, a winery with 18 pillbox-like cabins staking a boulder-strewn hillside (one afternoon, a coyote wanders up to join me at the pool deck). In another sign of the Valle's tourism-based transformation, the boutique resort aims to add a neighboring hotel. The development is also a by-product of the nearly 40 percent tax the government charges on wine; the winemakers say they need the supplemental income.

Many wineries are also opening farm-based restaurants, following in the footsteps of the region's premier chef,



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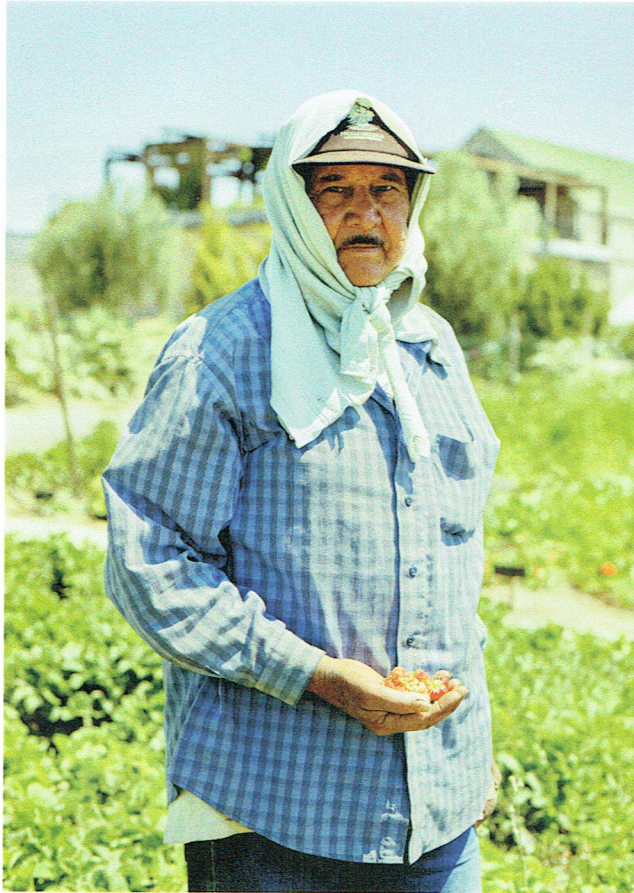
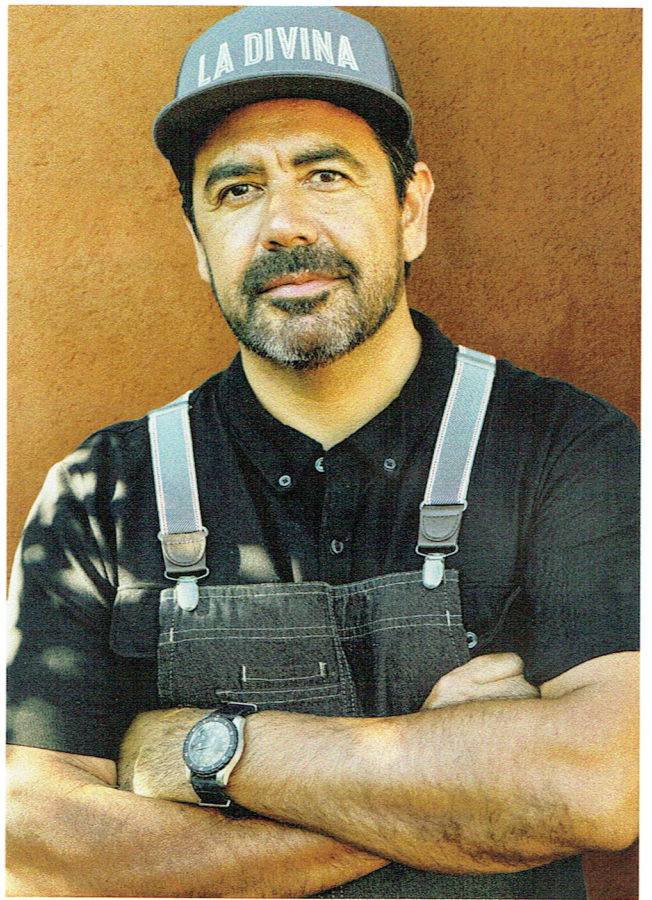


Clockwise from top left:
squeezing oranges at Clos de
Tres Cantos; winery designer
Alejandro D'Acosta; brickwork
at Clos de Tres Cantos; Adobe
Guadalupe owner Tru Miller;
crates awaiting harvest; Alonso
Granados tastes one of his
wines at Decantos Vinícola





Clockwise from top right:
Finca Altozano chef Javier Plascencia; alta cocina at Encuentro Guadalupe; a cook at Finca Altozano; tools of the harvest; a worker at Finca La Carrodilla; chopping octopus at Finca Altozano



“The Valle is more California than California can afford to be.”

Finca Altozano's Javier Plascencia. “Finca” means “estate,” and Altozano resembles a ranch freed of the walls that might have separated the open-flame grills, the terrace, and the garden beds that are lush with spring onions, lavender, and asparagus. A shepherd unleashes goats and lambs through the grassy fields that run right up to my table, where I scarf down charred quail, griddled corn cakes, and sautéed mushrooms laced with Parmesan. “Baja cooking is young and has no rules,” says Plascencia, who first made a name for himself in Tijuana, where his restaurants, including **Misión 19** and **Erizo**, have earned him international raves and *No Reservations* appearances. “We like to work with the season—and to burn things.”

Beyond the garden, Plascencia's executive chef, Pedro Peñuelas, shows me the bunny hutch, chicken coop, and hog pen, and then directs me to sit atop one of the 12-foot-tall, super-size wine barrels that are furnished as cushioned banquettes and act as ancillary postprandial lounges. Lunches here often don't finish up until evening. “The idea is to come here after the meal and drink a little and lie down under the stars,” he says with a laugh, mimicking a drunken sprawl.

I still ask myself whether Finca La Carrodilla, Fernando Pérez Castro's second winery, is my favorite in the Valle or just my last visit and therefore the one that lingers most. Its wines do finish long, particularly its compelling cabernet sauvignon. The 3-year-old winery, named for the patron saint of grapes, produces only estate-grown wines planted on an organic farm with an eco-friendly tasting room where solar panels shade the succulent-planted roof garden and, just beyond, lambs keep the grasses clipped between the vines.

Some of those yearlings could be tomorrow's *cordero* at TrasLomita, the garden-set dining room behind Pérez Castro's nearby Hacienda La Lomita winery. The restaurant grew out of the last question winery visitors always ask: Where's good to eat around here?

“Why not direct them here?” says Pérez Castro, arms spread, gesturing to the umbrella-shaded tables, the herbs drying on clotheslines, and the open-air kitchen where chef Sheyla Alvarado, at just 26 years old, is

challenging the Valle's big boys. Pérez Castro pours La Lomita's grenache rosé, which deftly squires Alvarado's Ensenada clams, green tuna ceviche tostadas, and grilled asparagus. As lamb tacos arrive, he introduces Pagano—“pagan”—a grenache aged in American oak with toasty notes that complement a plate of chicken that has been smoked indirectly for five hours.

Northern Baja certainly resembles California in its provenance-minded, eco-conscious, outdoor-living ways, but at this final meal, the Valle strikes me as more California than California can afford to be, a place where the grapes are all handpicked, the dining tables don't turn over, and the hogs are slaughtered on-site. The lack of water and arable land means the Valle will never be a big wine producer, but its very limitations are forging a

tasty experiment in hospitality that celebrates the symbiosis of food and wine—in a distinctly Mexican style.

“To our rebranding of rural Mexico,” Pérez Castro offers, raising his glass high in a final toast. “*Salud.*”

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