



BAJA CALIFORNIA'S CULINARY CLIQUE

WITH AN INFLUX OF SUMMER RESTAURANTS AND TOP CHEFS JOINING THE WINERIES OF THE GUADALUPE VALLEY, THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL GOING ON DOWN SOUTH

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Head chef Drew Deckman works on finishing the last dinner orders for the night. His restaurant, Deckman's en El Mogor, opened during the last week of June and will remain open until the end of October. ➡ A room inside Hugo D'Acosta's Casa De Piedra winery houses dozens of wooden barrels of wine. The five-acre vineyard produces about 100 barrels of wine per year. ➡ The rock cod fillet, prepared by Deckman, comes served with eggplant relish, purslane salad and a tomato vinagrette.

**BY JORDAN ENGLAND-NELSON
PHOTOS BY ISAAC ARJONILLA**

Sitting under a grove of pine trees, sipping Mexican wine as the sun casts its final rays on an endless field of grape vines, I understand why our chef, who is cooking octopus on an open grill not 10 feet away, says the Guadalupe Valley reminds him of southern France. "I felt like I'd been here before," Drew Deckman says of his first visit to Baja California's wine region, a two-hour drive southeast of San Diego. "It was very calming for me. I felt like I was at home." Deckman spent 10 years in Europe and five in Baja before starting his own restaurant, called Deckman's, in San José del Cabo in 2010. Last year, the Michelin-starred chef turned heads when he opened a second, summer location on the Mogor Badan winery in the Guadalupe Valley.

Deckman's En El Mogor is one of more than a dozen seasonal farm-to-table restaurants that have popped up in the valley in the past two summers. Three years ago there were only two. The huge increase parallels the growing popularity of Mexico's wine region. As the valley's reputation continues to grow, oenophiles are coming for the wine. But they're staying for the food. The Guadalupe Valley begins near the coast about an hour-and-a-half south of Tijuana and runs northeast along Highway 3, which connects Tecate with Ensenada. It can be accessed from

the north, but my friend and I opt for the more scenic route along the coast. With waves crashing on the right and lopsided hills rolling by on the left, the drive is breathtaking. The road hugs the edge of the cliffs, providing an impressive panorama of Baja's coastline as we begin the long, winding descent into Ensenada. Just before reaching the city, a hard left onto Highway 3 begins a short climb up into the hills that cradle the valley. Most of the vineyards inside the valley do not have addresses, just highway mile-markers and small signs that can easily be missed. After a switch back or two, we eventually find the turn off for Corazón de Tierra, one of the valley's hottest new restaurants. Earlier that week it had opened its own outdoor eatery, a gourmet food truck called Troika.

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The sun begins to set on Deckman's En El Mogor, a seasonal open-air restaurant on the Mogor Badan Winery. ➡ Troika's suckling pork is vacuum-sealed and boiled, then seared in a pan and served with an arugula and pickled radish. ➡ From left, Corazon de Tierra head chef Diego Hernandez, Vena Cava winery and Casa de Tierra owner Phil Gregory and owner of the Ensenada-based Cerveceria Wendlandt, Eugenio Romero-Wendlandt. The three men collaborated with their wives to create the food truck Troika. ➡ Dozens of green-tinted bottles are stacked on the walls of Hugo D'Acosta's Casa de Piedra offices in the Guadalupe Valley. ➡ Hugo D'Acosta's brother, architect Alejandro D'Acosta, designed the winery.



THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Octopus tostadas are served on a tortilla shell with a guacamole spread, and topped with grilled octopus, smoked tomato purée and garnished with tomatillo and habanero salsas. ➡ Hugo D'Acosta is the owner of Casa De Piedra, one of the most influential vineyards in the Valle De Guadalupe, Mexico's wine region. ➡ Corazón de Tierra's food truck is called Troika, a nod to the three couples that helped make it happen, and also a play on the word "troca," which is slang for truck in Mexico.



Phil and Eileen Gregory, an English-American couple that arrived in the valley after careers in the film and music industries, own Corazón de Tierra. Initially, they only ran La Villa del Valle, a six-room bed-and-breakfast that caters to wine enthusiasts. But the couple soon realized there was a demand for culinary experiences that the valley just wasn't meeting.

"When we came here 10 years ago, there was only one restaurant," Eileen says, referring to the area's first gourmet restaurant, Laja, which opened in 2001. "Our guests had nowhere to eat!"

The Gregorys had a lot of faith in their hotel's young chef, Diego Hernandez, and decided to build him his own restaurant, which they named Corazón de Tierra. They originally bought a food truck for catering events and to promote their new restaurant to foodies in Ensenada. Little did they know that word of Hernandez's culinary prowess would spread on its own, especially after Corazón de Tierra won Mexico's national Gourmet Award for Best Restaurant in a Hotel in 2012.

The Troika project is not your typical food truck. The truck-cum-restaurant serves wine from Phil Gregory's Vena Cava winery and craft beer from the Ensenada-based Cerveceria Wendlandt, owned by Eugenio Romero-Wendlandt and his wife, Diana Mendoza. The menu—which pairs spiced pâtés with wine and seafood tostadas and suckling pig tacos with beer—was created by Diego Hernandez and his wife, Krista Velasco, Wendlandt's head chef.

"It's nice to have the option of beer," says Mario Chavez, who was sitting under the veranda with his partner, Hector Saavedra, enjoying a plate of locally sourced cheeses. The couple lives in Los Angeles County, and has been coming to the valley once or twice a month ever since they bought a home in Ensenada four years ago.

The name Troika comes from the Russian term for a three-horse carriage, a nod to the three couples that helped make it happen. It's also a play on the word "troca," slang for "truck" in Mexico.



The truck sits outside the Vena Cava winery, a whimsical structure built into the hillside with the hulls of rescued fishing boats as a roof. A latticed veranda of recycled irrigation tubing casts a sinewy shadow over Dr. Seuss-colored tables and chairs where diners can eat while admiring the rural scenery.

The wall-less eating area sits above a small lake and is surrounded by the Vena Cava vineyard. Beyond the lake the mountains rise up from the valley floor. Perched on a bluff to the left, the Mediterranean-inspired La Villa del Valle hotel shimmers in the hot sun.

"We've seen it grow over the years," Chavez says of the valley. "It's so much more welcoming than Temecula and Napa. The people are so much more kicked back."

The Napa comparison is perhaps an inevitable one for California wine folk. But it's not



something the Guadalupe Valley aspires to. At least it's not something Hugo D'Acosta, the region's preeminent oenologist, aspires to.

Last year, *Wine Enthusiast Magazine* described D'Acosta as "the major force" behind "the most significant evolution in Mexican wine since Spaniards first planted vineyards" in the area. Drew Deckman called him "the guru of the valley."

Sitting in D'Acosta's office, built on top of a hill overlooking his Casa de Piedra winery, I asked him what he made of the region's explosive popularity.

"We have to be careful so that it lasts," D'Acosta says. "What looks like success could be the beginning of the end."

D'Acosta described Napa as a place that has been overtaken by its own inertia, where building sleek showrooms has become more important than cultivating grapes. He hopes that doesn't happen in Baja.

"We need to understand that there is a link between the people that live in the region and what is going on in the kitchens and the vineyards," he says. "Once you break that equilibrium, there's no going back." ♦

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Once the sun sets, the pine trees are illuminated by rows of lights that make Deckman's En El Mogor shine in the quiet darkness of the Guadalupe Valley. ➡ A bee feeds on a grape in the vineyard of Casa De Piedra in Guadalupe Valley. ➡ As the vineyards begin to glow with the setting sun, the Badan family and friends sit and enjoy a quiet Saturday evening after their dinner service provided by Chef Drew Deckman. ➡ La Cooperativa is a seasonal restaurant that is only open during the summer months. Hugo D'Acosta's brother, Alejandro D'Acosta, designed the restaurant and La Escuelita. ➡ Guests had an opportunity to sample Casa de Piedra's Contraste Continental wine, which uses grapes from Wente Vineyards in Napa Valley and Casa De Piedra. Another vintage, Contraste Intercontinental, uses grapes from Casa De Piedra and La Borde Vieille in France.