



Laja harvests vegetables, such as carrots from their garden (left), and uses them in dishes such as beef paired with carrot purée (below). Bottom: a traveler enjoying wine at Vera Cava



What Castro, Martínez and the Téllezes have in common, besides being from Baja, is their open-mindedness, entrepreneurialism and laser-like ability to identify what customers want. The Valle has enjoyed—or suffered, depending on who you ask—comparisons to Napa Valley. There is some legitimacy to the analogy, considering California and Baja California used to be part of the same country, and that both regions are characterized by a scrappy, do-it-yourself spirit. It's also true that well-heeled Mexicans and Americans flock here for wine country getaways.

But there are differences. While wineries in Napa are deciding whether or not to build car-charging stations, an ongoing argument in the Valle de Guadalupe revolves around whether or not to pave the roads. The area's restaurants, rather than looking to Europe or the U.S., mostly feature local talent. And winemakers here are operating on their own terms, producing whatever they want for an open-minded audience.

Back at Castro's family-style meal at Fauna, my friends and I consume a succession of large bowls brimming with bright flavors: blood clam *aguachile*; sautéed chocolate clam muscle in brown butter and lemon; sautéed octopus with *domingo rojo* beans; crunchy roasted lamb with *chilhuacle*. All are paired with wines made just a few hills away. The evening evolves into a



sobremesa—the tradition of lingering long after the eating is done.

After dinner, we step onto the patio and into the chill desert night. And this, perhaps, is the only way to end an evening in Mexico's wine country: to tumble into the star-speckled blackness, settle next to a roaring fire and make sure a bottle is never more than an arm's length away. The wind shifts and smoke forces us to turn our heads toward the restaurant's patio seating.

"Next time you're here, it's going to be completely different," Castro tells me. Though he's talking about outdoor furniture, I suspect he has much more than that in mind. **AW**



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