

Veteran band tour manager Rick Marino drives us to the **GUADALUPE VALLEY** for wine, dining and design.

COURTESY HOTEL PARTANA



RAISE A GLASS

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I am a Baja adventurer, I have been my entire life. Searching for the perfect beach, two-lane highways, dirt roads and the best taco I can find is how my adventures usually begin. This road trip opened my eyes to a different side of Baja – the wine country, known as Valle de Guadalupe, is one of the most talked about wine regions lately. It's located just 90 minutes south of the border from San Diego. Even if you don't drink wine, the food scene is worth the trip. They have their own term for it – Baja Med – and when you are here you will understand why.

There have been vines growing in Baja for a couple hundred years, when the missionaries who settled the peninsula planted them. I have driven through this area several times over the past decade, only stopping off to grab a quick bite on my way home, and each time I would notice a new hotel, restaurant or winery pop up along the highway – each with its own distinctive Mexican design. I have been wanting to hang out and explore the area to see what I have been missing. Boy oh boy have I missed a lot!

My journey starts by crossing into Tijuana and making my way south toward Ensenada. There is an excellent four-lane toll road (about \$5 all in, and yes, they take dollars) that runs south along the Pacific Ocean for about an hour. Then, follow the signs to La Ruta del Vino – yes, the wine route!

At the one and only traffic signal on the road into the valley, check out Tienda de Quesos y Vinos. The literal translation is "cheese and wine shop," and it's full of local products like olive oils and jams, wines and an excellent assortment of fresh cheeses lined up for sampling. The Ramonetti cheese, made in a valley on the other side of Ensenada, is soft and creamy with hints of Parmesan or Romano flavors – I could not get enough of it. Located next door are Kikey's bakery and Apple Pie Cafe. They both serve up coffee and snacks as well as an apple pie that is as round and big as a soccer ball. I had NO IDEA apple pie was a thing here, but I do now. YUM!

Driving into and around the valley, there are only a couple paved roads. Most of the things to see and do are located on well-maintained dirt roads, so drive carefully. One thing that stands out is all the great signage along the roads leading to wineries, restaurants and hotels. Following the signs to Finca Altozano restaurant, I pull into a compound created by one of Mexico's most famous and one of my favorite chefs, Javier Plascencia. He has chosen the perfect spot, located in the center of the valley, to set up his world. There are two restaurants: Finca Altozano, a beautiful indoor/outdoor space (the rib-eye cooked over hardwood was amazing) and Animalón, located underneath a 200-year-old oak tree, where you can experience the chef's tasting menu or a la carte entrees for more fine dining.

There is also Lupe! for more casual fare – tortas – served out of a vintage airstream. Plus, Ramonetti Heladería for ice cream. Additionally, part of the compound here is the six-room Hotel Partana, which combines modern architecture set inside the vineyard. Each room is complete with a king-size bed, floor-to-ceiling glass entry and rooftop deck with 360-degree views of the mountains and valley. It's pretty cool to be able to buy a bottle of wine at dinner and walk back to your roof deck for incredible stargazing, then wake up and walk across the vineyard to get a cappuccino before you start your day!

There are well over 100 wineries in and around the valley that range from small family farms to Mexico's biggest label LA Cetto and everything in between. On the weekends, many of the wineries are open the public, but it is best to make a reservation if you are serious about wine.

I start my day grabbing breakfast at La Cocina de Doña Esthela. From what I've been told, what started off as one table has now grown to over 100 tables. I was fortunate enough to show up midweek and even then, there was a tourist bus from Ensenada that braved the mile-long dirt road for this special meal. I can say without a doubt my machaca con huevos was the best I've ever had! That and a cup of café de olla, and I'm ready for my day.

My first winery stop is Monte Xanic, one of the larger producers in the valley. I have had their wine in many restaurants around Mexico over the years. The tasting room is beautifully designed and covered in hemp rope. It overlooks their vineyards and the entire valley. The rosé and Gran Ricardo were my two favorites.

My next stop is Lechuza Winery back on the main road. This small winery is a real family affair. Kristin and her husband, Adam, relocated to the valley to make wines with her father and now carry on the family business. Their store also sells local art, jewelry and food products – I bought a bottle of rosé and cabernet. Let's party!

Lunchtime brings me to another amazing place. Fauna is a beautiful restaurant located at Bruma, a winery and small resort that blows me away with its design. Reservations are necessary to get onto the property. The building features extra-long communal tables of thick wood and steel, which cross from inside to outside under an amazing canopy with a stellar view of the whole valley. The chef here is doing some really interesting dishes. My favorite was a charred butternut squash with salsa negra, a spicy black sauce, and handmade blue corn tortillas to make tacos. Sounds simple enough, but I can't wait to get back there to get it again. The portions were huge and perfect to share with up to four people. Plus, Bruma has several villas and rooms, each one uniquely built with native boulders and reclaimed objects from the area. Even though it is probably the most expensive place in the area, the experience is worth it.

My afternoon is spent checking out other hotels and wineries. Vena Cava winery is worth a stop for sure. The tasting room is built with upside down boats for the roof! Also, a food truck, Troika, is parked here with great tacos and craft beers. Further up the hill is Corazón de Tierra.



Reservations are a must for this tasting menu restaurant that was named one of Latin America's 50 Best Restaurants in 2017. Perched on top of the hill is the beautiful six-room luxury inn, La Villa del Valle.

Dinnertime? I hit up Deckman's en el Mogor, another outdoor kitchen underneath the trees. I get Kumiai oysters and the rib-eye grilled over an open flame. Reservations are required at most places around here, and opentable.com works well.

For accommodations, I found so many places just by exploring the roads. Agua de Vid was designed by two architects that have done an amazing job using Mexican tiles, bricks and found objects to create a unique modern rustic hotel and hostel. Maglen is a group of three resorts, from mid-century bungalows to deluxe villas and a modest hotel with its own wines and a brewery on the way. There's also the ultra-modern cabanas located along the hillside at Encuentro Guadalupe as well as the glamping tents of Cuatro Cuatros and Campera.

The possibilities are endless. Valle de Guadalupe is only 15 miles from port city Ensenada, which means an endless supply of seafood brought in fresh every day from all around Mexico. Plus, fresh fruits, vegetables and dairy from farms surrounding the valley. There are many other great restaurants to experience here, and it really will require me to keep going back as I have only scratched the surface. A version 2.0 is in our near future, after all it is just a road trip away. 🍷

Follow Rick Marino's travels on rickmarinotravels.com or on Instagram [@rickmarinotravels](https://www.instagram.com/rickmarinotravels). You can also write to him with questions at rickmarino@att.net.