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# Food and Wine, Not Sun and Sand, in Puerto Vallarta

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Mexico's Puerto Vallarta is admittedly not known for wine.

After all, Jalisco, the state surrounding the resort destination first popularized by Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and other Hollywood stars back in the day, is the home of tequila in the same way that champagne only comes from France's Champagne region. Then there is the lack of vineyards, which obviously are a prerequisite for making wine.

Despite these two realities, this city on the Pacific coast has transformed itself into an emerging destination for haute cuisine and quality wine, which in the latter case is increasingly grown and produced in Mexico.

While Mexican wine isn't widely exported, it has been made since at least 1597, when North America's oldest winery, Casa Madero, was founded in the Valle de Parras or, in English, Vines Valley. This appellation is located in the state of Coahuila, about 300 miles southwest of Laredo, Texas. The vast majority of wine is, however, produced from grapes grown south of California in Baja California's Guadalupe Valley. Think reds such as nebbiolo, syrah, and petite sirah.

## Authentic Mexico

This food and wine scene is the reason why I traveled to PV, as it is known locally, last month on my first international trip since the pandemic. Not only was I drawn by the growing number of chefs cooking seriously delicious food, but authenticity was a major factor in favoring Puerto Vallarta over competing destinations.

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Unlike purpose-built destinations, it has a real sense of place. This is most evidently seen in the number of locals, tourists, and expats mixing and mingling with each other along the Malecon, a beachfront promenade, or on the cobblestone streets of Old Town, also known as the Romantic Zone.

In Old Town, which is dominated by the crown-topped tower of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, all things food and wine come alive at Trio. Then again, an outstanding wine list is expected when chef and owner Bernhard Güt is originally from Alsace, the legendary French appellation.

Güt's restaurant, open since 1997, blends flavors from Mexico and the Mediterranean into what he calls New Mexican (not to be confused with New Mexico, the U.S. state).

I experienced the best he had to offer during a six-course, six-pairing dinner. The wine, handpicked by Güt, included some of Mexico's best. The standouts were the Pacific sea bass topped with huitlacoche, a black corn fungus that is often likened to truffles, and the Vinos Zanzonico 2017 Syrah Reserve from Napa Valley veteran Gerard Zanzonico, who now makes wine in a subregion of Baja California's Guadalupe Valley. The



1. Puerto Vallarta's old town is dominated by the crown-topped tower of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

2. The colorful streetscape of Puerto Vallarta's old town.

3. Bernhard Güt, chef and owner of Trio, opened the restaurant in 1997. Pictured in the wine cellar, he holds a bottle of Monte Xanic 1995 Cabernet Sauvignon.

4. Ictú, named Mexico's best new restaurant in 2019, features a wine list consisting exclusively of Mexican wine. Pictured are the SC Sotelo Blanco Chardonnay 2019, Rivero Gonzalez Rosado 2019, Vino de la Reina Duquesa Cuvée Blanc 2019, L.A. Cetto Reserva Privada Nebbiolo 2016, and Tinto Mexicano 2017 (Cabernet Sauvignon).

5. A cocktail gets a finishing touch at Ictú.

6. Dinner at Trio consisted of six courses and six pairings, all handpicked by chef and owner Bernhard Güt, who is originally from the legendary French appellation of Alsace.



The Malecon, or promenade along the sea.



runner-up was a 2018 sauvignon blanc from Tres Raices, a winery from Guanajuato in central Mexico.

"Today, the wine industry in Mexico is so dynamic," Güt said. "The wine is really world-class because our unique terroir allows for great wines at a great value."

On the other end of the spectrum is Ictú, a more locally oriented restaurant on par with what you find in stateside hipster enclaves. It wasn't surprising to learn it was recognized in 2019 by the magazine Food and Travel as Mexico's best new restaurant. Not only was the plating spectacular, but the sharply dressed young staff were genuinely attentive.

Chef and co-owner Mauricio Leal has gone all-in with a wine list consisting exclusively of Mexican wine. The decision, he says, has confused some customers who think quality wine must be imported.

Yet, as I discovered, his estate-grown 2019 sauvignon blanc from Monte Xanic, a large Mexican producer, was approachable and good. Those two qualities were repeated over and over again.

Dennis Lennox writes a monthly travel column for The Epoch Times.

## IF YOU GO

I stayed in the mostly expat neighborhood of Marina Vallarta, a short drive from the airport, at the Westin Resort & Spa.

The hotel, which only has ocean-facing rooms, was designed in a minimalist style that not only incorporated traditional architectural elements and decorative colors, but also preserved a couple hundred coconut palm trees across the grounds. Fittingly, the Westin's wine list includes several Mexican wines, with Casa Madero's non-vintage chardonnay being the obvious poolside choice.

Getting around PV is easy. Both local taxis (cash only) and Uber are widely available with rental cars or hired drivers recommended for day trips out of town.

All travelers returning to the United States must present proof of a negative COVID-19 test to their airline. In addition to complimentary testing at many hotels, there is also a testing center only yards from the airport terminal with tests priced at 450 pesos (about \$21) and results delivered by email in about 45 minutes.

Puerto Vallarta's airport is served by all major U.S. carriers, including American, Delta, and United.