

## SNOW ON WINE WINES OF MEXICO



Wherever Julie and I travel it is our habit to always drink local wine, and although Mexican wine was scarce and sketchy 30 years ago, both supply and quality have been improving. And with several wine writers declaring Valle Guadalupe, “the new Napa Valley,” we vowed to drink only Mexican wine in Puerto Vallarta this November. So for three weeks we bought every Mex wine available at stores, markets and at restaurants. L.A. Cetto Sauvignon Blanc was a favorite of ours with seafood, and ordering a bottle at an upscale restaurant, I pronounced Cetto as a Spanish word, “Say-tow.” The sommelier corrected me, saying “Chay-tow,” which I remarked would be an Italian pronunciation. “Si senior, but of course Senior Cetto is an Italian immigrant.” Well who knew?

Today 90% of Mexico’s wine comes from Baja. Near Ensenada, Valle Guadalupe, Santo Tomas Valley and San Vicente Valley comprise the thriving San Antonio de las Minas zone with its wine tourism “Ruta del Vino.” Santo Tomas and LA Cetto Viognier, Sauvignon & Chenin Blanc (and we saw Chardonnay galore) washed down everything from octopus stew to governor tacos. LA Cetto, Santo Tomas and many smaller wineries from Northern Baha had delicious red wines for grilled meat. Tempranillo, Shiraz (Syrah), Grenache, Cabernet Sauvignon & Franc, Merlot, Malbec, and surprisingly Nebbiolo (largest plantings outside Italy - thanks to Seniore Cetto?). From the Parras valley in la Laguna region of NE Mexico we found a bottle of Casa Madero Cabernet Sauv (the oldest winery in the Americas) to be great with fajitas.

So, why has Mexican wine making been so late to develop? After Cortes 1521 conquest of the Aztec empire, the supply of Spanish wine was rapidly depleted, so as governor of New Spain, he ordered vines planted. Native grapes made poor wine so European *Vitis vinifera* vines were brought in and thrived (unlike East Coast America, there was no Phylloxera root louse here). Casa Madero in La Laguna wine region in the state of Coahuila is the oldest winery in the Americas, founded in 1597 by Lorenzo Garcia in Santa Maria de las Parras (St. Mary of the grapevines) and still making wine today. Seems like a great start! So what went wrong?

The answer is politics and war. With local wine aplenty, imports from Spain plummeted, winemakers screamed and in 1699 King Charles II prohibited wine making in Spain’s colonies, except for the Church’s use. A heavy blow indeed, but far from the Kings view, some Missions continued large scale production. In 1701 Jesuit priest Juan Ugarte planted the first vines in Baja. The Jesuit Santo Tomas Mission and the nearby Dominican Mission Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe (now Valle de G) were thriving in Baja until 1850. Then a series of wars and political intrigue caused their severe decline. In the 1980’s a resurgence came. But wineries still struggle against widespread import of foreign wine. And general Mexicans prefer beer, mezcal and tequila.

So as visiting wine lovers, we encouraged every Puerto Vallarta restaurant where we dined to stock more Mexican wine. They appreciated our interest in their wine and on return visits to favorite places, they had “our bottle” ready!