

## Diploma Thesis, Unit 7, WSET Level 4

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# Winemaking in Baja California, Mexico The Wild West of Enology

### **Motivation**

A friend of mine has become a winemaker in Baja California, Mexico. At first I had no idea what to expect from Mexican wine, how big the industry was, and whether there was a winemaking tradition. I have visited Ensenada and the wine valleys six times since and got to know many of the winemakers in person. My perception of the wine was mixed. As someone who grew up with new world wines I like strong and straightforward wines; but some wines exhibited an odd salty taste, others were also oxidized. In general, however, the wines are very likable and the verve in the valley is contagious.

### **Goal**

I wanted to find out whether the heterogeneity of the wines was simply a result of the little experience of winemaking or whether it is linked to different philosophies, the climatic and geological characteristics of the region. Given that Mexican wine is virtually unknown in Europe I also wanted to see why this is like that and whether there is a need to change.

### **Methods**

Since my friend is a winemaker in the Valle de Guadalupe I had access to pretty much all people I wanted to see. I have led 10 formal interviews and have visited more than 30 wineries. Next to this I have browsed the literature and, of course, the internet for information about the winemaking aspect of Baja California. But the main focus was on-site research.

### **Contents**

After a short introduction I first explain the geography of Baja California and its various wine valleys to avoid any confusion of different names further down the text. I then give a brief summary of the history of winemaking in Mexico in general, whereof Baja California actually represents about 90%.

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I then discuss the climate, the special challenge of water and salinity, and the soils. While the temperature regime seems to allow for high quality wine the scarce precipitation is an obvious challenge. I have specifically asked in my interviews how the winemakers face these problems and what initiatives are underway to get hold of it. I have identified several strategies that already get applied and one issue linked to irrigation that seems worthwhile to be introduced.

I then move on to discuss the work in the vineyard and in the cellar. The Valle de Guadalupe offers in a relatively confined area a multitude of wine styles, detached from any regulation, with different cellar techniques and micro terroirs that contribute enormously to the appeal of this region. However, missing know-how sometimes deteriorates the actually sound quality of the primary material.

Finally I discuss the market and ask why we don't know Mexican wine. I mention the various initiatives of the smaller wineries and how wine only slowly becomes a part of Mexican culture. I also give an opinion on the current discussion of a denominación de origen.

## **Conclusion**

Actually the topic is way too large for a diploma thesis of such a small size. The region has a special appeal thanks to its diversity and the lack of tradition and regulation. This makes it to the Wild West of enology. In general I think that Baja California can compete in quality with prominent new world regions, even though right now the quality might not yet be as reliable as in other regions. But due to the lack of expansion potential Mexican wine will always remain a very local specialty. With increased know-how negative outliers can be reduced in the future; which should help overcoming the trait of malinchismo and give Mexican wine a stronger position in the inland market.