

Calafia, Valle de Guadalupe: Mexico's Napa Valley

Orderly vineyards blanket the rolling hills, where both small and large wineries dot the arid landscape every few miles. Since the time is January, only small tender sprouts sway from the vines, but they bring promise of a bountiful harvest. Even with a slight mid-winter chill, our group enjoys a wine tasting while we take in a beautiful rural view. This might be the typical experience that wine lovers encounter in the Napa-Sonoma areas of California, or in Oregon's Willamette Valley. But I'm in the Calafia Valley, 45 minutes northeast of Ensenada, part of Mexico's premier wine production region, the Valle de Guadalupe.

Calafia Valley: A Destination for Wine Aficionados

With the rising interest in wine appreciation in different areas of the world, Mexico's Calafia Valley is becoming more popular, especially for those going on cruises.

I recently sailed on a four-night cruise with Royal Caribbean's [Navigator of the Seas](#). After departing from Los Angeles, we spent two leisurely days at sea, enjoying the ship and all its activities, with a stop at Catalina Island as well. The next port stop was Ensenada, and there were only three shore excursions in which to participate.

An Unexpected Shore Excursion

Trying to choose from a cantina tour, a trip to the natural blowhole La Bufadora or the Calafia Valley wine vineyards, I decided on the third option even though I had never heard of wine production in Mexico.

According to our tour guide Gil, Calafia is the Napa Valley of Mexico and is the oldest wine producing region in North America. About one hundred wineries are located here, ranging from small boutique winemakers to large-scale producers like those found in California's wine country.

On our tour, we began with a quick drive around Ensenada, learning about its history and famous cantinas. Gil said that one of these bars created the original margarita cocktail, and now all of them proclaim that they did. The touring van then headed north on Highway 1, then turned off on Highway 3 and ascended into the parched, rocky desert terrain for about 30 minutes. Once we crossed the road's summit, we arrived in Calafia.

La Casa de Dona Lupe

Eventually, we turned onto a dirt road for about a half mile then stopped at [La Casa de Dona Lupe](#).

It resembled a hacienda with a bright exterior, a spacious tasting room and sunroom dining area.

The winery featured both dry and sweet white and red varietals. Since I prefer drier wines, I chose two reds (Nebbiolo and Tempranillo) and two whites (Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc) fitting that category. The staff also provided samples of locally made cheese and preserves. Each of these jams and jellies included piquant chiles, either jalapeno, chipotle, or habanero, giving off varying degrees of heat along with the sweetness of the fruits.

I must admit that I enjoyed two of the four wines that I tasted. The Nebbiolo, which is commonly grown in Italy's Piedmont region, offered a medium body with flavors of mixed berries, cherries, and a nutmeg-like spice. Of the two whites, I liked the Sauvignon Blanc most. Its flowery bouquet was appealing, as well as its caramel apple taste and smooth finish. Of the preserves, the strawberry chipotle was the best of the ones I tried.

Since we were outside the peak spring visiting time between March and May, we nearly had the entire winery to ourselves. That also proved to be true when we headed to the second, Matilde.

Matilde del Valle

If La Casa de Dona Lupe was easy to access, the second winery, [Matilde de Valle](#), was a little more difficult to reach. Traveling through the small town of El Porvenir, we then wound our way through primitive dirt road turns before we arrived at Matilde.

In addition to being a winery, it's also a resort and highly acclaimed restaurant. The grounds here resembled a more modern American-style retreat, complete with a large swimming pool, and its high terrace afforded the most postcard-worthy views of the valley.

Before we tasted the wines, we toured the vineyards and spied a few small grapes on the vines. Gil and the winemakers then took us down to the cellar, where the main wine production occurred. At Matilde, their specialty is primarily reds, and so we sampled a rose Grenache, a Malbec and a Syrah. Of this trio, I most appreciated the Malbec, made from Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes with a medium body and notes of raspberry and vanilla.

As we finished the tour and headed back to the cruise port, Gil and the driver Jerry took us to a hill high above Ensenada. It reminded me how far this border town has come, and how its wines may someday be widely enjoyed by all.

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-All photo by Janice Sakata-Schultze. Cover photo depicts wine tasting at La Casa Dona Lupe.