

CABO LIVING®

FLAVORS of the VALLE

Southern Baja Chefs Head North!

-by Joan Tucker & Paul Papanek | photos by Paul Papanek-

It all started with a very intriguing text message from our good friend, chef Drew Deckman: “We’re about to dress a lamb. Get down here ASAP!” “Down here” meant Valle de Guadalupe – the booming wine region outside of Ensenada. “ASAP” meant dropping everything, packing our suitcases, throwing Oscar, our dog, into the car, and making the four and a half-hour drive from LA as quickly as we could. Of course, we did exactly that - without hesitation. How could we pass this up?

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(ABOVE) | Drew Deckman and other chefs, have found culinary paradise in Valle de Guadalupe. The fresh ingredients of the region include the produce that occupies various containers in the kitchen of Deckman's at El Mogor. Among other things, the valley has artisanal olive oil producers, such as Camilo Magoni's olive grove.

But wait. Why didn't "down here" mean Cabo? Isn't that where Drew's eponymously named restaurant is? Well - for the last several years, Drew has spent the Cabo summer doldrums at the beautiful Mogor Badan Winery in the Valle running a seasonal pop-up restaurant that consists of an alfresco kitchen and outdoor seating overlooking the winery's stunning vineyards and the mountains that define the valley.

This past summer, he felt that the timing was right to make the move more permanent, so he closed Deckman's San José and opened, full-time, Deckman's at El Mogor. He's excited - and he has company.

Angelo Dalbon, owner of the celebrated Tre Galline restaurant in Todos Santos, has also made the summer move - having opened his pop-up at the Villa Montefiori Winery on the other side of the Valle for the past two summers.

What is so different in northern Baja that it would make Drew come north? What was so enticing that Angelo and his wife/partner Magda would pack almost their entire kitchen - including the giant pasta machine that has been in Angelo's family for generations - into the back of a truck in order to spend the summer cooking in the Valle?

Could it be that the lamb we were about to taste came from El Mogor's own ranch? Or that the olive oils that Angelo uses are produced in the middle of the Valle by Camillo Magoni, one of the most honored and important winemakers in the region, who's current passion is traveling the globe to bring back rare olive tree seedlings, growing them into trees, and pressing the oil? What we found out was that it's all of this...and more.

It's no secret that the food movement in northern Baja, led by chef Javier Plascencia

and his "Baja Med" cuisine, is off the charts. Other chefs like Benito Molina, Diego Hernandez, Jair Tellez, and Andoney Garcia - just to name a few - have walked through the door that Plascencia has opened - all to great reviews and success. Drew refers to them as a brotherhood of chefs. It's also not a secret that the wine coming from the over 50 wineries in the Valle is finally getting international recognition. It's a combination that's making food and wine aficionados sit up and take notice.

Both Drew and Angelo were attracted to this growing scene, the inventiveness of the

food, and the local ingredients. Drew had been doing guest-chef appearances over the last several years with Plascencia, as well as consulting for Hugo D'Acosta - perhaps the person most responsible for the success of the Valle - and as he spent more and more time in the region, he became enamored of what was available to him there. The ingredients weren't necessarily better than in southern Baja - just different. Ensenada is one of Mexico's largest ports for mussels, oysters,

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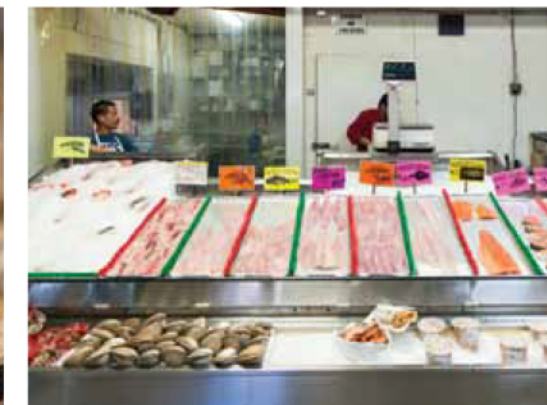
(BELOW) | Angelo and Magda of Tre Galline, in Todos Santos, also have been drawn to the region, and have a pop-up at the Villa Montefiori Winery.



(BELOW) | At Deckman's at El Mogan, Pacific oysters from Punta Abreojos, dressed with pirul mignonette, tobiko and pink peppercorns from the ranch. Wine casks are stacked up at Mogan Badan. Sheep are raised at El Mogan's ranch. Quail with hibiscus reduction, pinto bean puree and purslane is an inventive dish from Deckman's.

clams and shrimp, as well as a center of blue fin tuna sea ranching. Miniature vegetables come from the fields south of Ensenada, olives come from the Valle, San Ignacio supplies fresh dates, and tomatoes and strawberries come from the San Quintin Valley, just to the south. Farmers like David Martinez have been cultivating Manila clams and Kumamoto Oysters in the region since 1999.

Drew and Angelo were also drawn to the challenge of a new and very different audience for their food. The Valle is now a destination, and people come from all over Mexico and the US to tour the wineries, eat at the hip restaurants, and stay in any number of new boutique hotels and bed & breakfasts. It's a very different clientele than the resort crowds of southern Baja.



We arrived at Deckman's at El Mogan late in the afternoon, as the sun was starting to bathe the vineyards in a rich, golden light. Drew greeted us in his usual style: hugs and a chilled bottle of El Mogan's crisp white Chasselas. We pulled up a couple of barstools to the kitchen – an all-in-one brick contraption that's his work space, grill, and wood-burning oven. As the lamb was roasting, Drew shucked a few dozen Pacific oysters from Punta Abreojos – dressed with pirul mignonette, tobiko, and pink peppercorns from the ranch – that we greedily slurped as he started to break down a beautiful, line-caught Monterey Bay Aquarium green-list yellowtail from Isla Natividad.

Before long, dinner guests began arriving, filling up the tables that are directly adjacent to the kitchen. It's a unique arrangement that completely removes the separation between

chef and diners. Guests can, at any time, wander over to the grill to talk to Drew and watch him work. It's the perfect example of open plan dining – one in which the chef and guests can interact with each other in a relaxed and inviting atmosphere throughout the meal. Unlike Julia Child, at Deckman's at El Mogan, Drew is never alone in the kitchen.

As the restaurant got busier, Drew and his crew shifted into a Valle-calm style – higher gear. His main stations are the wood burning grill and oven, and we watched him plate succulent quail that comes from a farm that's literally behind his house in the Valle – that was served with hibiscus reduction, pinto bean puree and purslane. We almost stole a

(ABOVE) | Valle de Guadalupe produces vegetables, quail eggs, wine and more. The open-air setting of Deckman's at El Mogan permits interaction between the guests and the chef. Fresh ingredients straight from the source is the general theme in Valle de Guadalupe. Drew Deckman obtains a great deal of the seafood for his dishes from Captain Cortez's fish shop.

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(ABOVE) | Micro greens from El Sargazo are among the foods produced in the Valle. Angelo works in the kitchen at Tres Galline. Agua Mala beer is a local craft beer available at Deckman's at El Mogor. Other local food producers in the area provide such things as rabbits.

plate of the yellowtail crudo with quail egg, sea urchin and pink peppercorns – before it went out, but we were too busy finishing up the last bits of our perfectly roasted lamb with fresh tortillas. We noticed diners eating another version of the lamb – crispy carnitas – and washing it down with a wheat beer that Drew designed and makes in conjunction with local craft brewery Agua Mala in Ensenada in a building comprised of three shipping containers that serves as brewery, office, storage, and tasting room. Drew's beer is made with honey from the Mogor ranch and grains from Mexicali – another temptation that was hard to resist.

As the evening wound down, we found ourselves sitting at a table under the stars

with Drew, sharing mezcal and a variety of farm-fresh cheeses and *membrillo* that come from Drew's favorite producer, 4th generation cheese maker Marcelo Castro at Cava de Marcelo in Ojos Negros, an hour's drive of the Valle. It was the perfect end to a perfect evening.

With a very happy but tired Oscar in tow, we got in our car and headed to our hotel for the night.

Late morning the following day, it started all over again as we made our way up the winding driveway of Villa Montefiori to see what Angelo and Magda were up to. We walked into the compact kitchen of their restaurant – overlooking an enormous expanse of the Valle - just in time to witness

the assembly of their house-made tortellini. Magda had just roasted local sweet potatoes and was preparing the filling while Angelo was standing at the pasta machine making the sheets of fresh dough that would become the wrappers. Other kitchen staff were busily making fresh focaccia with cherry tomatoes and basil from their garden while attending to all of the other details for lunch service.

Suddenly, Angelo ran over to the big refrigerator and said to us - with his usual child-like excitement - "Look what the farmer dropped off right before you got here!" and pulled out five very fresh, beautiful, just dressed rabbits from the farm down the road.

"What are you going to do with them?" we asked, realizing that the term farm to table had just taken on a new meaning for us.

"Not sure yet!" he said, smiling, as he headed back to the pasta machine.

Pasta cabonara was the special for the day's lunch. His spin on the classic dish, however, occurred to him when he was at his favorite fish market in Ensenada and saw some exquisite smoked tuna. He thought it would be great fun to substitute the tuna for the bacon that's usually the key ingredient.

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(BELOW) | Farm-fresh cheeses are available from Marcelo Castro (wearing the hat, shown with Drew Deckman), at Cava de Marcelo. Angelo and Magda prepare tortellini by hand at Tres Galline.



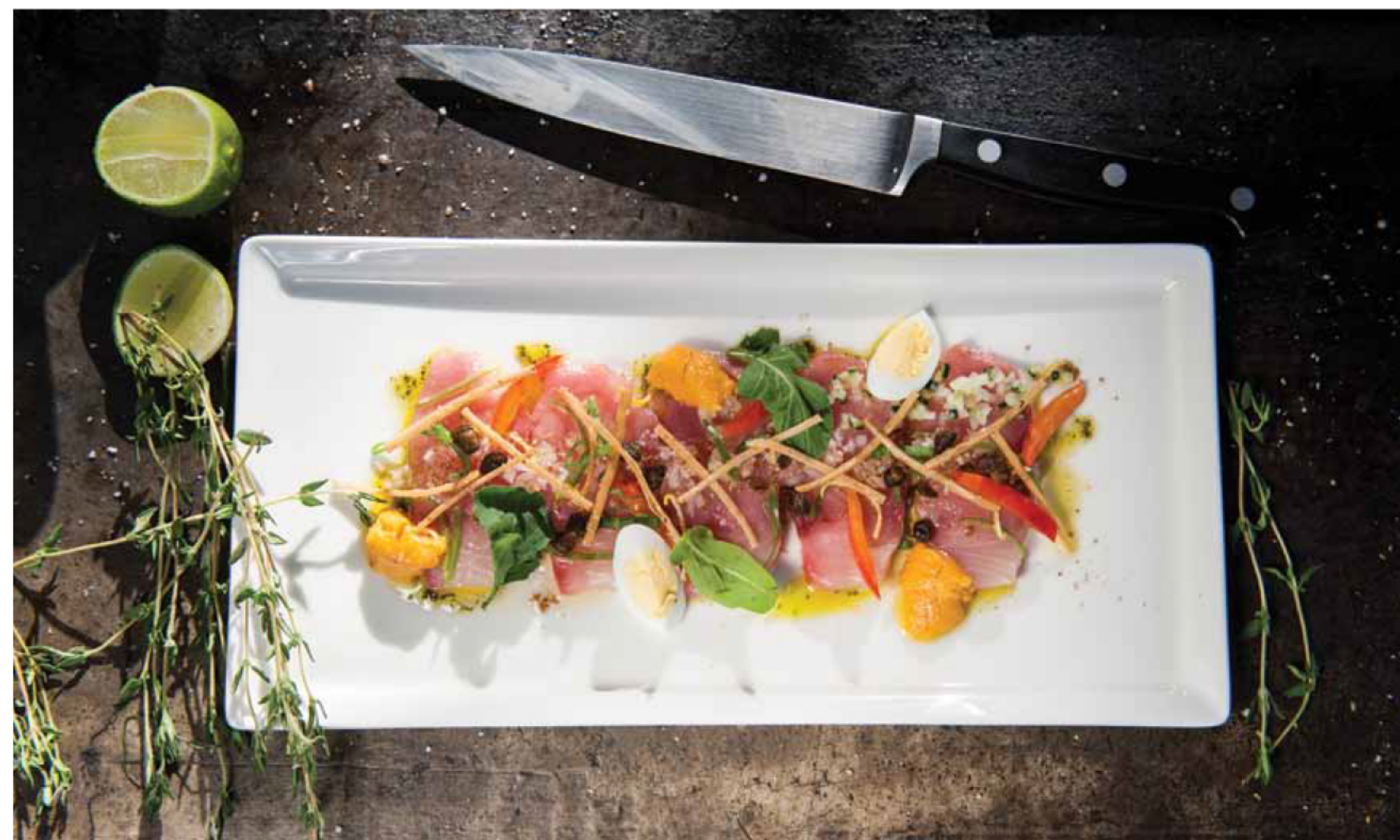
(BELOW) | Angelo and Magda are known for hand-making their own pasta. Drew Deckman begins to break down a line-caught yellowtail from Isla Natividad, south of Ensenada. These fish are sustainably caught and are Monterey Bay Aquarium green-list certified. Another unique and tantalizing dish is the octopus with eggplant, tomatoes and local olives.

It was an inspired idea, and the result was fantastic!

It's inventive dishes like this – plus a pasta with fresh zucchini flowers from their garden that had strong hints of curry, perfectly grilled octopus with eggplant, cherry tomatoes and local olives, sautéed rabbit livers, and other exquisite *Baja-Italia* dishes and, of course, endless bottles of delicious Villa Montefiori wine – that make guests want to spend entire afternoons at the

restaurant. It's something that surprises and delights Angelo and Magda, reminding them of long, lazy lunches in Italy, filled with good wine, good food, and good conversation.

Like everyone else at the restaurant that day, we found ourselves caught under the spell of the Valle and were just unable to leave. The afternoon stretched into evening. Angelo decided that it was time to treat us to an olive oil tasting. He brought over an assortment of small bottles filled with



golden liquids of varying color, each with a crude, hand-scratched label that looked like a code. These were the olive oils that Camillo Magoni pressed from the trees grown from his imported seedlings. Each oil had distinct characteristics and went perfectly with the house-made ricotta and rustic bread that Magda served us.

“Roast chicken?” asked Magda, slyly. We laughed and declined, not sure where we could put it.

Then it was time for dessert, and Angelo came up with something so spur of the moment, so unexpected, all we could do was look on in awe as he made it. He assembled a

collection of seemingly disparate ingredients – little, round Perugia Bacci chocolates, small pieces of homemade bread, local sea salt and Camillo’s olive oil. He proceeded to split the chocolates in half, melted them – with a blow torch – over the bread, and finished them with the salt and a drizzle of oil. That was complimented with a flight of Angelo’s house-made grappa, lemoncello, and herbal digestives. Our heads were spinning.

After spending a few days with Drew and Angelo, we felt that we had a deeper

(ABOVE) | A mouth-watering masterpiece: yellowtail crudo with quail egg, sea urdin and pink peppercorns from El Mogor’s Ranch. Camilo Magoni’s olive oil is made from seedlings collected all over the world. At Tres Galline, focaccia is being made with cherry tomatoes, fresh basil and local olive oil.

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understanding of their attraction to the Valle. Standing in both of their kitchens is like taking a tour of the Valle and northern Baja. Not only are most of their producers local, but they have personal relationships with all of them. It's become a symbiotic relationship: the producers are excited to be asked to develop new ingredients and use new techniques, which fuels the chefs' inventiveness which, in turn, spurs them to ask for even more.

Heading home, on our way out of the town of Guadalupe, we stopped at a roadside stand to buy fresh olives and honey from a local rancher. Our cooler was already filled with Marcelo's cheeses, jams, salsas, and pickled veggies from Mogor's own farmers market, as well as all of the wine and olive oil we were allowed to take across the border. We knew that we couldn't duplicate the experience of the Valle, but we would have a lot of fun trying. *El Fin!*

(FAR LEFT AND BELOW) | One of Deckman's creations: rock cod filet with Natalia's tomatoes, quinoa, onion tatamada and arugula. Drew uses locally-sourced food components in his open-air kitchen to produce this dish and a variety of culinary delights. Grappas and digestives and dishes such as Pasta Carbonara with smoked tuna are available at Tres Galline. An assortment of olive oils at Tres Galline. Many of the local food products that the chefs in the Valle use are available for anyone to buy - sometimes on the side of the road.

