

A little taste of Baja in a bottle

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With May approaching, we don our sombreros as we head south of the border for the celebration of Cinco de Mayo. While margaritas and beer are the typical beverages of choice, wine also offers an interesting pairing with Mexican cuisine.

As winter continued to linger, my wife and I recently fled to Mexico for a warm change of pace. Besides better weather, Mexico offers world-class culture and cuisine. Mexico has significant history behind its wine industry, as it has the oldest wineries in the new world. The Spaniards established grape growing and wineries in the sixteenth century, as they colonized this part of the new world. The majority of grapes were used for brandy production and food, with a small amount used to make table wine.



*Bill Garlough,
Level One Master Sommelier*

Two important wine regions today are Aquascalientes on the northeastern gulf side and the Baja Peninsula on the northwest side of Mexico. Both have ideal, Mediterranean-style climates for grape growing. The days are hot and the ocean breeze cools the grape crops at night, allowing the sugars to develop while preserving the grape's acidity levels.

While dining, we tried Mexican and South American wines with our meals. Some of our favorite Mexican wines included Chateau Camou's Vino Blanco, Monte Xanic's Chenin Colombard and L.A. Cetto's Chardonnay. These wines are all produced on the Baja Peninsula, along the Pacific coast. Delighted with these new wine discoveries, we looked in our favorite wine stores when we returned. Unfortunately, Mexican wine production is low, and these brands are not yet established in the Midwest. However, you may run across these wines when you visit the American Southwest, southern California or Mexico.

As an alternative to Mexican wines, when planning your next south-of-the-border fiesta, consider wines from Chile and Argentina. They are the two major producers in South America and offer quality, affordable wines that are readily available.

Flavor pairings

As Chef Rick Bayless has demonstrated on his TV cooking shows, although Mexican cuisine is commonly thought of as tacos, burritos and guacamole, it comes in many styles, flavors and presentations. The flavors tend to be big, bold and spicy and some of the wines from Argentina and Chile pair well with this cuisine.

Young, fruity and un-oaked wines pair best. Chilean wines that work well are the clean crisp sauvignon blancs and medium-bodied, spicy Carmenere. The king of wine from Argentina is the lighter, velvety red Malbec and this also pairs well with this cuisine. All of these are food friendly, reasonably priced wines and are readily available at your local wine shop.

It's said that variety is the spice of life. So next time a margarita or beer won't do with your Mexican cuisine, try one of these South American wine pleasers.

Ideal climate

MANGO SALSA

Here is a recipe for mango salsa that we make fresh at My Chef Catering in Naperville. It can be served with tortilla chips or as a fresh and flavorful topping for grilled chicken or fish.

- 16 ounces fresh mango, diced**
- 4 ounces pineapple, diced**
- 2 ounces green pepper, diced**
- 2 ounces red pepper, diced**
- 4 ounces red onion, diced**
- 1 ounce jalapeno pepper, seeded and diced**
- 3 tablespoons fresh cilantro, chopped**
- 2 ounces honey**
- 1 tablespoon Tabasco sauce**
- Juice from 1 fresh lime**
- 3 tablespoons olive oil**
- Salt and pepper to taste**
- Yields 1 quart.**

Combine all ingredients in glass bowl and mix well. Refrigerate for 1 hour before serving.

Bill's Picks

Consider one of these south-of-the-border wines for your next fiesta. (Listed with suggested retail pricing).

White wines

- Catena Chardonnay - Argentina: \$17
- Crios Sauvignon Blanc (blend) - Argentina: \$13
- Casa Silva Reserva Sauvignon Blanc - Chile: \$10

Red wines

- Punto Final Malbec - Argentina: \$10
- Crios Malbec - Argentina: \$13
- Concha y Toro Carmenere - Chile: \$10

Bill Garlough is a Level 1 Master Sommelier and an owner of My Chef Catering in Naperville, the winner of the U.S. Chamber's 2007 Small Business of the Year award. Bill can be reached at www.mychef.com or wineparings@mychef.com.