



FOOD

Why Baja Norte Is Becoming a Culinary Hot Spot (And Exactly Where You Should Eat)

BY ARCHANA RAM

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Illustration by Linnéa Teljas-Puranen

Tijuana may not be the first city that comes to mind when you think of Mexico's culinary boom, but the metropolis just 20 miles south of San Diego has quickly morphed into a gastronomic hot spot with white-tablecloth eateries, hipster food courts, and time-honored taquerias. The face of *la revolución*? Chef Javier Plascencia.

Hailing from a renowned food family—some say their legendary Caesar's restaurant is the birthplace of the namesake salad—the Tijuana native attended

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culinary school in San Diego, and in 2006 opened Romesco Mexiterranean Bistro in San Diego's Bonita neighborhood with his family. The menu has been a shining example of Baja Med cuisine, which fuses Mexican fare with ingredients reaped from the region's Mediterranean-like climate.

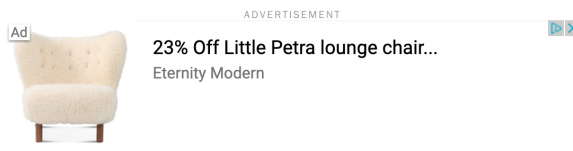
But it wasn't until 2011 when Plascencia debuted Misión 19 in Tijuana that the chef started to make waves as the poster boy for Baja Norte. The much-lauded fine dining restaurant has helped revitalize Tijuana, signaling a shift away from the city's crime-ridden reputation and instead toward creative and entrepreneurial pursuits in food, art, and more. While also working on various restaurants with his family's consortium, Grupo Plascencia, the chef opened Erizo Baja Fish House & Market but had eyes on taking Baja Med beyond his hometown.

In 2012 Plascencia opened Finca Altozano, a rustic, seasonally driven restaurant set on a ranch in the heart of Baja's idyllic wine country, Valle de Guadalupe, located less than two hours from San Diego. And this summer, the chef, who splits his time between San Diego and Tijuana, opened his largest project to date: Bracero, a stunning, bi-level restaurant that celebrates the chef's culinary heritage in San Diego's Little Italy nabe.



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Even with projects zigzagging across the border, Plascencia makes time to travel through Tijuana, Rosarito, Ensenada, and the Valle with plenty of bites and sips along the way. He gave Vogue.com the scoop on his favorite restaurants, bars, and more.



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Where to Go for the Best Tacos

It's hard to play favorites, but Plascencia's go-to is the carne asada at Tacos El Franc, a casual taqueria in Tijuana's Zona Centro. "The ingredients are fresh and tortillas are handmade," Plascencia says. "Plus, they're superfast and friendly." In Rosarito he heads to Tacos El Yaqui, a popular stand with the lines to prove it. The sole option is the arrachera (marinated skirt or flank steak), which combines a flour tortilla, melted cheese, and meat seared outside on a wood-fire grill. "I love the way they char the jalapeños. I have to have those tacos every few days."

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Favorite Childhood Restaurant

Breakfast at [Restaurant Amor](#) in Tijuana was a staple of Plascencia's childhood, thanks in part to its proximity to his father's pizzeria. Now the chef dines at Amor with his own family. "I really like the huevos rancheros. The food is like something your mom or grandma would cook."

The Best Bars

Plascencia has a long history with Tijuana's [Sótano Suizo](#). "They play great music, do craft beer, and have [gourmet] hot dogs. I've been going there for almost 20 years." For a cocktail, Plascencia pulls up a chair at nearby [Bar Nelson](#), where he sips the Especial, an elevated rum-and-Coke libation topped with a salt rim. "The vibe is very old-school."

Favorite Winery

Valle de Guadalupe is booming with numerous tasting rooms, sophisticated hotels, and gourmet restaurants—it's tough to pick just one. "I really like [Las Nubes](#). It's a great winery with a beautiful view, and the wines are always very good. I love their Nebbiolo."



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The Best Lobster

In Puerto Nuevo, Baja's famed fishing village eponymous with juicy lobster, Plascencia is a regular at [La Guerita](#), where he orders the dish "the way it's supposed to be"—fried with a side of rice and beans. "Sometimes they won't have the local catch, so you have to ask for the real Puerto Nuevo lobster."

For a Special Occasion

Valle de Guadalupe's Laja, led by the "Thomas Keller of Mexico," chef Jair Téllez, boasts a refined menu in a bare-bones, bucolic setting. "I could sit there for hours with a couple bottles of wine and have a great time. It's very simple—rustic but very nice."

To Make It a Weekend

For foodies and oenophiles who may have overindulged, head to the 144 acres, winery, and 14 glamping-style cabanas that make up Ensenada's [Cuatrocuatros](#). "They have great hiking trails and a cool terrace where you can see the Pacific Ocean."

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