



Progress by the Pour

In Mexico's El Bajío, a surprising cast of women leads a winemaking revolution

By Lydia Carey • Photography by Leila Ashtari

After Karina Hernández told her parents she wanted to study winemaking, they stopped speaking to her—for five years. “They told me I would become a drunk if I worked at a winery,” she remembers. “They said, ‘Your family is here. Your life is here. Your future is here.’”

This might seem shocking in the 21st century, but the *here* Hernández refers to isn't Napa or Sonoma. She grew up in Toluca, just west of Mexico City, and works in nearby El Bajío (Spanish for “The Lowlands”), a high-desert farming region made up of parts of the states of Aguascalientes, Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Querétaro that's renowned for being Mexico's breadbasket. What's less well known about El Bajío is that it's also the cradle of Mexican winemaking.

Over the last 20 years, oenophiles in the U.S. have noticed the excellent wines coming out of Baja California's Valle de Guadalupe, but the Spanish were growing grapes in El Bajío as early as the 1550s. Today, the region is home to more than 30 wineries. What's perhaps more surprising than the existence of these places is the number of women who are running them. While the exact number is tough to confirm, at least 12 female executives or winemakers work in El Bajío, meaning there's a high-ranking woman at roughly 40 percent of the region's wineries. That may not seem like a huge quantity, but it's estimated that only about one in 10 wineries in California are led by women. And the number of female power players doing this intensely time-consuming work is even more noteworthy given that in Mexico women are expected to prioritize family over career—especially in this conservative-leaning part of the country.

I traveled to El Bajío to meet a few of these persistent women and learn about the obstacles they've overcome and how they're helping to power this growing wine region.

Karina Hernández

Finca Sala Vivé

I meet Hernández, 34, in the tourist-swarmed tasting room at Finca Sala Vivé, an enormous Querétaro facility that produces nearly 2 million liters of wine a year for the Mexican arm of the Spanish sparkling wine giant Freixenet. Hernández, the assistant winemaker, manages the labs here, and I can't help but notice the steel-toed work boots peeking out from under her dress pants; she sheepishly admits that her staff insisted she dress up for the interview.

A trained food chemist, Hernández started her career producing hydroponic lettuce for an industrial agriculture company but decided to study winemaking—despite her family's objections—after being laid off. She decamped for Baja California and one of the country's biggest wineries, L.A. Cetto. “I told them, ‘I want to learn how to make wine, even if it means cleaning out tanks.’ And that's what it was—literally. I cleaned out a lot of tanks,” she recalls with a laugh.

After just one harvest in Baja, she met the head of Freixenet, who offered her a job in Querétaro. As we walk among the vines, she talks about the transition from being a lab assistant eight years ago to her current position. At the beginning, she couldn't figure out how to create the flavors that head winemaker Lluís Raventos was looking for. When she asked him to bring her a bottle to recreate, he took her to France for 24 hours to taste dozens of wines. She returned a different person, and these days she's fully empowered to experiment. She bubbles with excitement as she offers me a sip of a still-fermenting Port. It's astoundingly sweet, with a hint of menthol. “Yes!” she gushes. “The soil here gives the wine those green notes!”

“A glass of wine is a moment that someone decided to share with you,” she continues. “It's an accumulation of moments, of stories, of experiences. It's the most important window into the soul of the person that made it.”

Visit: An hour outside of Querétaro's bustling capital, Finca Sala Vivé is popular for day trips and tours. The winery's strength is sparkling varietals, but it also produces a wide range of still ones, including muscat, sauvignon blanc, merlot, and malbec. freixenetmexico.com.mx



This page, clockwise from top: a workstation in the Finca Sala Vivé lab; Hernández checks out the harvest; the entrance of the popular winery





Cristina Olvera

Viñedos La Redonda

Just a few minutes down the road from Finca Sala Vivé is La Redonda, where vineyard manager Cristina Olvera emerges from the vines on a farm bike, wearing a wide-brimmed hat. As with Hernández, her career began with familial disapproval. Olvera, 36, studied agricultural chemistry at the Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro. She was the first member of her family to attend college, and when she got a job running De Cote farms, a ranch that was growing carrots, tomatoes, and corn, they protested. “They said, ‘You can’t go run a farm!’” she recalls. “‘Women aren’t made to do that kind of work! Why can’t you just get a job here, live at the house, not come home every night with your shoes dirty?’” Her laugh ripples across the vineyard. “They were so disappointed.”

Nonetheless, Olvera enjoyed the job. Only later did wine become part of the plan. “I never wanted to study viticulture,” she says. “One day my boss came to me and said, ‘We’re going to add a vineyard to the farm, and you are going to manage it.’ I was like, ‘Nooo!’ But we started to plant the vineyard and suddenly it was like, ‘Actually, this is really cool.’”

A few years later, she landed her position at La Redonda, and she’s been running the 170-acre vineyard ever since, producing bottles such as the award-winning Orlandi cabernet-malbec blend.

“I’m like the malbec,” she says, “I adapt. Malbec grows in good soil and in bad.”

Visit: La Redonda, located just off Highway 120, is open daily, and the winery also hosts public events four times a year (in March, May, July, and October). Its wines include malbec, cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, merlot, and syrah. laredonda.com.mx



Clockwise from top left: preparing to harvest at La Redonda; Olvera in her vineyard; the winery’s relaxed tasting room; clipping a grape cluster

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Clockwise from top left: Cordero in the vineyard; fermenting tanks at Tres Raíces; the modern winery building; running a test in the lab



Alejandra Cordero

Tres Raíces

About two hours northwest of the Querétaro wineries, just past the tourist hotspot of San Miguel de Allende, is the acclaimed small producer Tres Raíces. Head winemaker Alejandra Cordero drives me through the Guanajuato scrubland to the vineyard. Like Hernández and Olvera, the 30-year-old Cordero came from a chemistry background. She planned to become a pharmacist, but while studying she found herself drawn to the challenges of oenology.

“Winemaking seemed to be a lot like life,” she says. “The harvest is just once a year. If you screw up, you have to get up, learn your lesson, and start on the next year’s production. When I realized wine wasn’t easy, I thought, Oh, this is for me.”

Cordero spent her first five years in the industry at another vineyard about three hours northwest of here, in Aguascalientes. She eventually took charge of production, but even in a position of authority, she encountered a common problem: institutional sexism. She found out the men around her were making double or triple her salary, so she asked for a raise. “They told me there was no money, that they couldn’t help me,” she recalls. Four months after she quit, her male replacement was hired at four times her salary.

Cordero ended up finding a far more supportive environment at Tres Raíces, where she has worked for the past three years, producing 7,500 cases annually, including a rich merlot (a gold medal winner at the Concours Mondial Bruxelles) and a tobacco-tinged cabernet (that won silver). As we sip that cab on the leather couches in the owners’ lounge at Tres Raíces, she tells me, “Everything I have learned comes down to a single sip.”

Visit: Set in the misty hills of Dolores Hidalgo, Tres Raíces features modern architecture, an *alta cocina* restaurant (open Thursday to Sunday), and a boutique hotel. Wines include merlot, cabernet sauvignon, syrah rosé, and sauvignon blanc. tresraices.com



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Mailén Obon

La Santísima Trinidad and Viñedos San Lucas

Mailén Obon seemed destined to become a winemaker. The Argentina native’s mother told her that of her five pregnancies, it was only with the now 30-year-old Mailén that she craved grapes.

Obon came to Mexico four years ago to take a job at La Santísima Trinidad, on the outskirts of San Miguel de Allende. She now manages both La Santísima and nearby San Lucas, two wineries that combine to form a 600-plus-acre parcel and produce more than 13,000 cases a year. When I meet her at San Lucas, she’s dressed in her “uniform,” a button-up shirt and a puffy down vest for the morning chill. She too tells me a story that’s indicative of the sexism many of these women face. One year after her arrival, she became pregnant. She had the unshakable support of her boss, but she knew she needed help, so she hired a male colleague from Argentina to work as her assistant. During her maternity leave, he met with her boss and tried to take her job. She went back to work 18 days after giving birth.

“I think that people often see a woman and think she’s weak,” Obon says. “But you have to think, Wait a minute, this is my position. There is a reason why I’m here.”

Those words are emblematic of a resiliency all these women have in common—and one they hope to pass on to a future generation of female winemakers. “This community of women is like a pack of lions,” Obon says. “The lionesses take care of each other and their children. The lions wander off, but the lionesses keep the pack strong.”

Visit: Viñedos San Lucas has two restaurants (open Thursday to Sunday), a 14-room hotel, and a residential development. Guided tours and tastings are offered daily, as well as nature activities such as horseback riding. Available varietals include pinot noir, tempranillo, and cabernet franc. vinedossanlucas.com



Clockwise from right: the tasting room at San Lucas; Obon inspects the crop; bougainvillea flowers on the property; a water tower next to the winery

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