



**VALLE GUY**

Roberto Alcocer invokes his bucolic Baja home in Oceanside.

**AND GREEN O IS ITS NAME. OH!**

Big sky's the only limit for Brandon Cunningham.

**INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION**

How Dominique Lafon changed white Burgundy in Mâcon.





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VALLÉE



AND SEA



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Story by Carol M. Newman • Photos by Steve Legato • Carlos De La Torre original acrylic on canvas. Courtesy Rebecca Webb Studio



## CHEF ROBERTO ALCOCCER HAS FOUND A

new hogar lejos de casa, home away from home—Oceanside, California. Inside Mission Pacific Hotel, his restaurant Valle honors the food and culture of his birthplace in Northern Baja, Mexico. Dine in front of a wall of glass with an epic unobstructed ocean view. Although the seaport town of Ensenada and adjacent Valle de Guadalupe are too far to clearly see 119 miles south, Alcoccer's sportive cooking captures a distinctive duality of sea and land.

Ensenada, Mexico's Bahía de Todos Santos, "Bay of all Saints," rewards those who seek its divine perfection. Ocean swells seduce surfers from all over the world who optimistically wait out supernatural waves up to 50 feet. Golden hour commences with a sunset du jour—changing marigold to tangerine and fire to clay, tilting sunswept faces skyward. For chef Roberto Alcoccer, who grew up in Ensenada along the waterfront, gloriously briny sea urchin with fresh clams served on warm taco shells, ceviche de erizo con almeja, and other fresh-catch seafood from street vendor carts, have the power to spark the most spiritual experiences of all.

Alcoccer's industrious parents often used weekends to unplug in nearby Valle de Guadalupe. "Dad was an automobile mechanic and Mom worked in the auto parts store." While Roberto and siblings played, his parents grilled dishes such as traditional carne asada. Come evening, the coastal fog crept into Valle de Guadalupe, cooling off the warm and arid countryside, a symbiotic connection between land and sea.

No longer sleepy and undiscovered, Valle de Guadalupe draws millions of visitors each year for its growing wine and restaurant communities. Considered the Napa Valley of Mexico, it boasts a Mediterranean climate and over 25,000 acres of vineyards, grapevines that date back to the 18th century. Old World Mexican wineries that supply the country's larger restaurants and retailers, and dozens of boutique wineries run by first-generation winemakers "represent the two faces of the Valle," as Alcoccer casts it. "Ingredients-driven cuisine based on locally-sourced farms, fish, and seafood, often cooked outdoors over wood and charcoal, are points of pride for locals," he says.

"You have to like to eat to cook. I cook because I like to eat."

Alcoccer credits his grandfather, an appraiser for the Bank of Mexico, for that straightforward logic about food. "My grandfather ate in the great restaurants of Mexico City and wore a suit and tie to work every day. He suggested that I choose a career that makes me happy." A Rotary Club youth exchange program sparked Alcoccer. When asked on the application to list three countries he hoped to visit, he wrote, "France. France. France." The strategy worked, and Alcoccer spent a summer in Arcahon, a seaside resort in southwest France. He attended 7 a.m. classes at Lycée des Métiers Condorcet and worked as commis in the afternoons at Le Patio restaurant.

Cooking exhilarated him. "I wanted to take advantage of every opportunity that came my way and learn from the best." Alcoccer worked for La Broche under Sergi Arola in Madrid and Enrique Olivera at Pujol in Mexico City. "I met Chef Enrique in a cooking competition where he noticed that I work cleanly. I thanked him and asked to stage at Pujol. He answered, 'Instead, why don't you work for me?' Of course I said 'yes' and he handed me his business card."

"I opened my first restaurant Malva in 2014 with little more than \$4,000 in my pocket and an idea: a summer pop-up." Pastoral valley vistas dotted with olive, citrus, and fruit trees as far as the eye can see surround the open-air restaurant with thatched roof palapa covering. In an outdoor kitchen, meats such as lamb slowly evolve over long cooking times.

Alcoccer originally wanted to import a Basque grill from Europe, but that proved a too-expensive, out-of-reach endeavor. "Even second-hand, the price of one grill was equivalent to the price of an entire kitchen. A college friend turned engineer, Carlos, built a Frankenstein version of a charcoal grill, which we tweaked over time. Eventually, chefs who visited Malva gravitated to our grill, asking me how they could get their own." Together with Carlos and two other friends, the quartet refined the concept and founded the company Vesuvio, manufacturing in Mexico versatile, high temperature, charcoal oven-grills that reduce cooking times and energy consumption.





ROBERTO ALCOER  
VALLE  
OCEANSIDE, CA

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AT DUSK, WHEN DINING  
ROOM LIGHTS DIM, THE  
DARK SILHOUETTE NEARLY  
DISAPPEARS. NO WORRIES.  
ALCOGER REASSURES,  
“CLOSE YOUR EYES, TAKE A  
BITE, AND LET GO.”

As zealous about using fresh ingredients as he is about his cooking equipment, Alcocer originally relied only on his own garden for Malva's produce, and on his own animals for dairy [cheese, butter, ice cream] and meats. But taking his kids to school at 7 a.m., harvesting, butchering, prepping, and running service took their toll. "I cooked, hosted, and greeted guests, too. It was very intense," admits Alcocer. As Malva gained renown, he hired a purchaser to shop for ingredients, and a team to care for the garden and animals. His chef de cuisine, Victor Garcia, has cooked at Malva for six years. Alcocer reflects, "I never imagined Malva would become something more than a pop-up."

When Mission Pacific approached Alcocer to translate his cuisine sensibilities

for their hotel, he saw it as another opportunity to grow, learn, and showcase the food that embodies his homeland.

Christian Schulz, principal of Los Angeles-based interior design firm, Studio Collective, traveled to Valle de Guadalupe to observe Alcocer's culinary style. "I noticed a stark contrast between the laid-back setting and totally elevated cooking. Roberto has tenacity, grit, and soul. He's made due with little while making a big impact. He's so rooted in location and region, and brings inspiration from a very specific biodynamic geography." Schulz alludes to the soils of Valle de Guadalupe, which range from sand and sandy loam near the valley's dry riverbed, to granite in the foothills and clay in the hillsides. "Climate dictates specific growing

capabilities. We wanted to bring this rugged landscape in honest materials to the restaurant."

Struck by Malva's hand-painted wall murals that validate Mexico's growing street art culture, Schulz incorporates equally colorful and expressive artworks at Valle. Tijuana figures prominently, especially in whimsical, hand-carved and painted clay animal figurines inspired by Mexican folk art from Perro y Arena ceramic studio. Lighted by incandescent Christmas bulbs, it's high-low art that evokes a rustic bar on a Baja beach. A 'made in Mexico' commitment applies to all of the restaurant's furniture. Hand-made plateware hails from Oaxaca, and a member of the Alcocer family sews the napkins. A bucolic and colorful Valle de





Black Beauty. See Tarta recipe, pages 14-15. Photo by Steve Legato.

Guadalupe landscape, La Curva, painted by Carlos De La Torre perhaps best captures the spirit of Northern Baja. Artist Rebecca Webb partnered with Oceanside Museum of Art in curating the De La Torre piece and says, "It was important to engage artists of color in the Northern Baja region."

The menu at Valle embodies Schulz's characterization of "grit and soul."

Chef de Cuisine Raul Casillas charged with adapting Malva's high standards for freshness to Valle, says, "Everything we

serve is made in our kitchen. When possible, Casillas works directly with local fishermen such as Harbor Pelican, and looks to small family-owned farms for seasonal produce, for instance, Valdivia Farms out of Carlsbad and Escondido, San Diego's J.R. Organics, or San Diego urban microgreen grower, Scintilla Farms.

Casillas provides more behind-the-stove insight. "We respect quintessential Mexican flavors and push them in new directions, most often as fun, modern

adaptations. Chef Roberto adds depth of flavor and elegance to underappreciated ingredients." Alcocer affirms: "I like introducing humble ingredients into fine dining." He tones down what he describes as "the sometimes bitter flavor of bruléed, charred onions" by combining them with more onions that have been slow-sautéed, with butter cut in for richness, and demi-glace added for sweetness. "It's classic French onion soup flavor. The dish acquires balance through caramelization, and caviar adds acidity and brightness." Served on a black ceramic plate, caviar stylus set, Alcocer's inky hit single swirls with blackened onion grooves. At dusk, when dining room lights dim, the dark silhouette nearly disappears. No worries. Alcocer reassures, "Close your eyes, take a bite, and let go."

Dessert cleverly piggybacks on a collaboration with luxury aroma company, Apothia, which created a custom scent, called Bronzed, for the hotel. Alcocer says, "I wanted to incorporate this feature of the property in the restaurant—an edible essence that plays with the senses and uses the same ingredients as the perfume." He named the dessert after the scent.

"I received a box in the mail containing each scent element: orange blossom, petit-grain, bergamot, orange, grapefruit, and jasmine." His plated olfactory composition consists of nectareous curd of wild orange blossoms, grapefruit and orange juices, and zests. Chemistry plays a role in the flower petal fabrication. A potion of yogurt, powdered sugar, methylcellulose, and xanthan gum placed into acetate molds, then dehydrated, transform as pretty white petals. When the full flower blossom gets delivered to guests, dulcet fruit aromas hit the table first. The sight delights, as does the taste of citrus curd and foam, lemon-lime ice cream flower pistil with bee pollen tip, and jasmine tea butter-brown sugar crumble [a.k.a. dirt]. An accompanying second plate holds a white paper origami flower sprayed with Bronzed essence, a folded love note from Alcocer.

He asks, "How could I finish a meal that starts with love and time, the onion tarta, and end with just a slice of cake and bowl of ice cream?"



# Aguachile de Chayote

## FOR THE AGUACHILE:

5 grams onions, peeled  
20 grams lime juice  
5 grams fresh cilantro leaves  
30 grams cucumbers  
75 grams coconut water  
2 grams serrano chiles  
Salt to taste  
1 chayote squash, cut into long strips

## FOR THE AVOCADO MOUSSE:

1 avocado, pitted, flesh scooped  
20 grams water  
1 lime, squeezed  
Salt to taste  
20 grams extra virgin olive oil

## FOR THE COCONUT GELÉE:

500 milliliters coconut milk  
20 grams sugar  
2 grams salt  
3 grams agar agar

## FOR THE GARNISH:

Amaranth  
Hibiscus flowers  
Oxalis  
Finger lime  
Sea beans  
Oyster leaf  
Serrano pepper, seeded, thinly sliced  
Micro cilantro  
Olive oil to taste  
Maldon sea salt to taste

**FOR THE AGUACHILE:** In a blender, add onions, lime juice, cilantro, cucumber, coconut water, serrano chiles, and salt. Process until smooth. Pass through a fine-mesh sieve. Using a vegetable sheeter, turn chayote to thin ribbons. Place ribbons in a vacuum bag with aguachile and marinate.

**FOR THE AVOCADO MOUSSE:** In a blender, process avocado, water, lime juice until smooth. Season with salt. Stream in oil to emulsify.

**FOR THE COCONUT GELÉE:** In a pot, add coconut milk and bring to a simmer. Season with sugar and salt. When dissolved, slowly whisk in agar agar until smooth. In a tray, add ½-inch layer of mixture and cool until set to a firm gelatin. Cut to 1-inch dice.

**TO SERVE:** On a plate, spread avocado mousse. Top with ribbons of marinated chayote squash. Garnish with amaranth, hibiscus flowers, oxalis, finger lime, coconut gelée, sea beans, oyster leaf, serrano slices, and micro cilantro. Drizzle with olive oil and Maldon salt. Pour a generous amount of aguachile liquid on top.







# Tarta

## FOR THE TARTA SHELL:

100 grams flour  
50 grams butter  
3 grams salt  
30 grams fish stock  
8 grams onion ash  
9 grams fish sauce  
8 grams squid ink

## FOR THE VEGETABLE DEMI-GLACE

Oil, as needed  
150 grams onions, peeled  
75 grams carrots, peeled, trimmed  
75 grams celery  
50 grams tomato paste  
1 head garlic  
375 milliliters red wine  
4 sprigs thyme, picked  
2 liters vegetable stock

## FOR THE ONION HEARTS:

3 white onions, sliced 1-inch thick  
50 grams black vinegar  
20 grams butter  
Salt to taste

## FOR THE GARNISH:

Siberian sturgeon caviar, farmed by  
*Acipenser Baerii*, Poland

**FOR THE TARTA SHELL:** In a food processor fitted with hook, briefly pulse flour, butter, salt, and onion ash until it resembles wet sand. Transfer to a bowl and incorporate stock, fish sauce, and squid ink. Knead 5 minutes until a smooth ball forms, then rest 30 minutes. Transfer to a clean work surface and roll out as thinly as possible. Line 10 3-inch tart molds with parchment. Press dough into each mold, poking small holes in bases. Freeze for 20 minutes. Preheat oven to 320 degrees. Bake for 15 minutes, or until crispy.

**FOR THE VEGETABLE DEMI-GLACE:** Preheat oven to 450 degrees. In a large roasting pan, add oil and roast vegetables in oven, adding color without caramelizing. Split head of garlic, width-wise exposing all cloves. In a pot, sear garlic until golden. Add oil and caramelize tomato paste to a deep red. Add to pot. Deglaze with red wine, and bring to a gentle boil. Add roasted vegetables. Reduce liquid to one-quarter. Add stock and bring to a boil, lowering heat to a simmer. Reduce until demi-glace coats back of a spoon. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve, pressing vegetables with back of a spoon to extract all juices.

**FOR THE ONION HEARTS:** In a sauté pan over high heat, brulée onions with weight on top, until one side completely chars. Set aside and cool. In a vacuum sealing bag, add black vinegar, butter, and salt. Cook in a 176 degree water bath for 15 minutes, until tender. Set aside and cool.

**TO SERVE:** Fill one-quarter of a tarta shell with warmed vegetable demi-glace. Add onion hearts, carefully arranging petals in even concentric circles to fill circumference of tarta. The demi-glace should fill in the gaps between the onion hearts and fill tarta to the brim. Garnish with a generous quenelle of caviar.





