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Susan Magrino Agency
352 Park Avenue South, 13 FL
New York, NY 10010
212.957.3005
www.smapr.com

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TRAVEL

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FORK IN THE ROAD



SABOR A CABO PHOTO

Tables await at Puerto Los Cabos, where more than 50 restaurants and 16 wineries take part in the main event of the weeklong Sabor a Cabo festival.

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Mexico, Caribbean food festivals

Tourists flock to resorts to enjoy lavish regional cuisine, wine and spirits

BY IRENE S. LEVINE
Special to Tribune Newspapers

Imagine lavish multicourse dinners served on the beach, cocktail parties with celebrity chefs you've seen on TV or wine tastings led by award-winning sommeliers. These are just a few reasons why tourists are flocking to wine and food festivals being held at resort destinations across Mexico and the Caribbean.

These festivals celebrate regional foods, wines and spirits, simultaneously offering guests a taste of local culture and opportunities to mix with locals as well as other visitors who share their passions for gastronomy.

"The number of festivals is definitely increasing, a reflection in great part of the growing interest in where food comes from," said C. Michael Hall, a scholar in tourism and hospitality and author of "Food and Wine Festivals and Events Around the World."

Often held during low-occupancy or shoulder seasons, festivals help promote destinations as well as individual resorts, restaurants and food producers. In addition to their economic benefits and support of aspiring chefs, many provide assistance to charitable and community organizations.

Ready to check one out? Plan ahead, because tickets sell out quickly. You can often purchase festival packages that sometimes include hotel stays, or opt to buy tickets for one or more events. Here is a sampling of what to expect at some popular ones; additional information can be found on the websites shown:

Mexico

Valle de Guadalupe
Fiestas de la Vendimia
Location: Baja California
Dates: Through Aug. 17

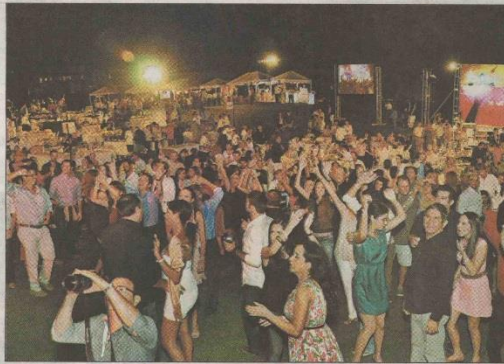
This two-week festival of the "big crush" began Aug. 1, celebrating the wine harvest. Participants can partake in more than 40 events across the region, including vineyard tours, exclusive dinners and galas, and live entertainment ranging from jazz to opera. This is one to consider for next year because the kickoff was a sellout. It is held at the Riviera del Pacifico in Ensenada, once an iconic hotel for the Hollywood elite in the 1930s.

Though Mexico is famous for tequila and beer, this region produces 90 percent of the country's wines, which are garnering increased attention from wine enthusiasts. More than 50 wineries participate. tinyurl.com/bajawine

Sabor a Cabo
Location: Los Cabos, Mexico
Dates: Nov. 30 - Dec. 6

This weeklong festival highlights regional cuisine and wines of Baja California. Taking advantage of the temperate climate, most events are held outdoors. For example, the main event (typically drawing as many as 2,000 people) is held in a sculpture garden at Puerto Los Cabos, with more than 50 restaurants and 16 wineries participating.

Sponsored by CANIRAC, a Mexican restaurant trade group, and the Los Cabos Tourism Board, proceeds from the main event are donated to the fire department, Red Cross and Children's Foundation of Los Cabos. Among the chefs confirmed to



SABOR A CABO PHOTO

Music and dance are part of Sabor a Cabo, which highlights Baja California cuisine.



PHOTO BY JEROME LEVINE

A wine-tasting seminar at the Ritz-Carlton Cancun is part of the Cancun-Riviera Maya Wine & Food Festival, which celebrates cuisine from Europe and the Americas.

attend: Federico Zanellato (formerly at the legendary NOMA restaurant in Denmark) and chef/restaurateur Richard Sandoval. saboracabo.mx

Cancun-Riviera Maya
Wine & Food Festival
Location: Cancun, Mexico
Dates: March 12-15

Now in its fourth year, this festival celebrates cuisine from Europe and the Americas, featuring top chefs and sommeliers. Festivalgoers participate in wine and spirit (including mezcal) tastings; a gourmet tasting village featuring local products and signature dishes; a Taste the New World opening dinner; interactive cooking challenges with chefs; and a lecture-style culinary education series. Next year's honorees are not yet named, but this year's tribute dinner held at Secrets The Vine honored French chef Daniel Boulud and Mexican chef Guillermo Gonzalez Beristain.

Founded by David Amar, who hoped to raise the gastronomic profile of the region, the festival has attracted broad sponsorship from Food & Wine Magazine, Travel + Leisure magazine, the Cancun Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Riviera Maya

Tourist Promotion Trust and the Mexico Tourism Board. A portion of funds is used to provide computers for a nonprofit housing program, for educational and social services for needy children and families, and to award scholarships to gastronomy students. crmfest.com

Taste of Capella Food & Wine Festival
Location: Cabo San Lucas, Mexico
Dates: July 8-12

This festival is intimate (limited to 120 participants) and immersive. Held at a spectacular five-star beach resort located at Land's End (where the Pacific Ocean meets the Sea of Cortez), this four-day epicurean adventure features gourmet Baja and international cuisine and offers opportunities to interact with chefs, wine-makers and mixologists. The resort's food and wine director and executive chef both once worked under legendary chef Thomas Keller. Festivities include a welcome reception showcasing artisanal Mexican cheeses, wines and specialty dishes; a beach barbecue; and a five-course dinner with each course prepared by a different chef. capellahotels.com/cabosanlucas/foodandwine



PHOTO BY JEROME LEVINE

Saint Jacques carpaccio and sweet and sour sweet potato is served at a dinner held at Secrets The Vine at the Cancun-Riviera Maya Wine & Food Festival.

Caribbean

Caribbean Food & Wine Festival
Location: Providenciales, Turks and Caicos
Dates: Nov. 6-8

Celebrating Caribbean culture and cuisine, this event is sponsored by local hotels and restaurants in partnership with the Turks and Caicos Tourist Board. All-star chefs from around the world (such as "Top Chef" contestant Leah Cohen of New York's Pig & Khao) and renowned vintners take part. Now in its fourth year, it raises funds for the Department of Youth Affairs and the islands' Little Chefs mentor program that supports and encourages local chefs to pursue careers in hospitality, an industry vital to the local economy.

The welcome dinner, limited to 100 guests, takes place at Blue Haven Resort. Also on the menu: a Women of Wine luncheon at Beach House Fire and Ice restaurant; four food and wine pairings (limited to 20 people each) at West Bay Club; an Island Street Food Fair demonstrating expert grilling and barbecue techniques; Dinner with the Stars at Grace Bay Club, which is a lavish five-course food and wine pairing held on the beach; and The Gourmet Safari, a progressive dinner party that allows visitors to dine at different resorts and discover talented local chefs. caribbeanfoodandwinefestivalci.com

St. Croix Food & Wine Experience
Location: St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands
Dates: April 12-18

This six-day festival on the largest of the U.S. Virgin Islands began more than a decade ago when two local restaurateurs wanted to bring the restaurant community together. The kickoff event, Cuisine on the Green, is held at Carambola Golf Club, where small bites and spirits can be sampled at every use. Other activities held across the island include food and wine tastings, specialty dinners, celebrity chef competitions, cooking demos, a city crawl, a food fight on the beach, gourmet dinners and a sunset barbecue. With kids' cooking classes, this one is fit for the whole family.

The festival benefits the St. Croix Foundation, which aims to improve educational conditions in the country. Guest chefs (such as Tony Castellucci, executive chef of the Facebook Culinary Team) teach a class at a local high school and offer culinary internships. stcroixfoodandwine.com