

# Replacing Cervezas With Chardonnays

By Joel Millman, The Wall Street Journal - August 24th, 2012

In 1967, Amelia Morán Ceja emigrated to the U.S. to join her father, a farmworker who toiled for years in California's vineyards.

Today she's crossing another border, turning upwardly mobile Latinos into wine aficionados is with her subtle blend of viticulture, down-home cuisine and a Web-based marketing campaign.

"We're chipping away at the margarita barrier," said the 57-year-old mother of three, who is one of the first Mexican-American women to open a commercial vineyard in Napa Valley. By that she means the commonly-held belief that spicy Mexican foods—and other chili-based delights from Asia and Africa—must be washed down with beer or a margarita instead of a top-flight wine. Ms. Morán Ceja uses Web videos to educate Latino foodies, many of them first-generation immigrants about the assembly of Mexico's more complicated dishes. She also travels the U.S. educating sommeliers of high-end Mexican and other ethnic restaurants on pairing varietals with their meals.



Her timing is good: The notion that chili pairs better with wine is a buzzy new concept in the food world.

François Chartier, who spent a decade researching his recent book "Taste Buds and Molecules: The Art and Science of Food with Wine," discovered that capsaicin, which is at the root of chili sauces, can't be tamed with beer or water. "Capsaicin does not dissolve in water. It is soluble in fatty and sugary substances," he said. "Wine is perfect."

Ceja Vineyards is a good-sized boutique winery, selling 8,000 cases each year of its Chardonnays, Pinots and Sauvignon Blancs, with a price range from \$20 to \$50 a bottle. Members of its wine club, many of them Latino, account for over half of sales. Ms. Morán Ceja credits their loyalty to the meticulous way she constructs wines to match Latino palates and to her focus on customer service.

The process begins in the weeks before picking, when Ms. Morán Ceja samples grapes. Closing her eyes as she bites into her Chardonnay grapes, two recipes spring to mind: a classic enchiladas suizas with Oaxaca cheese and Dungeness crab with a chili-tamarind sauce, a family favorite.

Getting her Chardonnay in shape to pair with what she dreams of on a plate starts with the harvest. Ms. Morán Ceja likes an early harvest for low sugar content and alcohol in the 13% to 14% range, which she said leaves a fruitiness that compliments the chili in both dishes.

She said she wants to capture the tartness of her Chardonnay grapes, which she likens to green Pippin apples. That plays well off the tanginess of the ancho chili at the base of her sauces. The process of getting to that taste continues in fermentation. Ms. Morán Ceja uses aged casks of French oak, which she said has a tighter grain than other woods. Of her 20 barrels, she said, no more than two are new.

With Chardonnay "you get a creamy taste," she explained, "but we want it creamy, not buttery" because of the Oaxaca cheese in her enchiladas. She's looking for what she calls a "nice" acidity in her Chardonnay, without any residual sugar taste. Transferring from blending vats to bottles, she chooses a dense cork to slow the oxygen exchange as fermentation finishes in the cellar over the next 10 to 12 months.

Growing up in Mexico, kneading cornmeal dough with her grandmother to prepare peppery breakfasts and lunches for family members working on her grandmother's ranch, Ms. Morán Ceja absorbed the aromas of dozens of chili varieties. She learned which ones made tongues burn or eyes water. Later, as a student at a Catholic boarding school in Aguascalientes, she studied at the side of mentors whom she calls her "nun-chefs." They taught her how different chilies respond to chemicals in the foods they're paired with.

Ms. Morán Ceja's training rose to a gourmet level when she returned to California and began cooking for her American family—many of whom had risen to senior farming positions at some of Napa's top vineyards.

Surrounded by relatives who grew grapes, picked grapes and turned grapes into wine gave her the grounding. Later, at the University of California, San Diego, the idea of pairing wines with Mexican food gradually took hold in her mind. In 1983, she and her husband, Pedro Ceja, pooled the resources of their two families to buy their first piece of land. Armando Ceja, her husband's brother, is the vineyard's winemaker.



Growing her grape business involved luring consumers like herself—educated, upwardly mobile immigrants—and then teaching them to overcome their reluctance to join the wine-snob set. In 2009 she joined the cadre of young video producers who perform on the Web, starring in monthly "episodes" of herself preparing mainly Mexican meals. They are shot in her kitchen, each ending with a close-up of the wine that best complements the dish. Red snapper tacos cry out for Sauvignon Blanc; grilled chiles rellenos belong to a Chardonnay. Pairing an arrachera skirt steak with a Cabernet Sauvignon is "a no-brainer," she declared.

Like a lot of bloggers and Internet video-producers, the Latina vintner feeds her muse through interaction with her audience. Web requests flow in from fans, mostly women, in a panic over what wine to serve with the de rigueur ethnic fare they are planning for a big family dinner, or to welcome their husband's boss.

"Someone will email me or call, saying 'I'm making gnocchi for my mother-in-law,' or 'I'm doing Korean barbecue, what do I serve?'" Ms. Morán Ceja said with a laugh. "I'll talk them through the recipe, the ingredients, and then explain what wine works and why."