

# A Silicon Valley city offering more than tech

Underrated as a holiday destination, San José has a benign climate, great wineries and a thriving food scene, says Amber Gibson

The largest city in the San Francisco Bay Area – and briefly California's state capital in the mid-19th century – San José is today best known as the capital of Silicon Valley, home to one of the world's largest concentrations of tech innovation and expertise. It is no surprise, then, that the city has one of the highest average household incomes in the United States, too.

But it's not all about business. With a sunny, Mediterranean-like climate and a diverse community – and sitting just half an hour's drive (or an hour by train) from central San Francisco – San José might well be America's most underrated leisure destination as well. Spare a few days for this overlooked gem on your next visit to the west coast, and you will be rewarded with an arty, vibrant city that's bursting with food, wine and culture galore.

So, let's start with the wine. Most people think of Napa Valley and Sonoma when it comes to Californian vineyards, but the longest continuously family-owned and operated winery in the US is, in fact, located in the Livermore Valley, just 30 minutes north-east of San José by car. Founded in 1883, Wente Vineyards ([wentevineyards.com](http://wentevineyards.com)) is now run by the family's fourth and fifth generations, with a commitment to low-input farming and sustainable agriculture.

"Livermore is a small American Viticultural Area and we are a tight-knit community," says Niki Wente, director of vineyard operations. "The great thing is that you don't have to be a wine expert to enjoy drinking here." As the largest winery in Livermore, Wente makes dozens of wines suitable for every palate, including limited-release bottles that you can only find in its tasting room. It is also the only vineyard in the country with a championship golf course, designed by Greg Norman.

Bigger (and slightly better known) is the Santa Cruz Mountains American Viticultural Area, just south of San José, where wineries such as Ridge, Mount Eden and House Family vineyards produce exceptional Old World-style pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay. Meanwhile, tucked away on a privately owned parcel of land in the middle of Almaden Quicksilver County Park, you will find artisan wines at Alamitos Vineyards ([alamitosvineyards.com](http://alamitosvineyards.com)). This newcomer produces just 300 cases a year, but is already winning double gold medals in international competitions – thanks in part to the local microclimate's large diurnal shift and the area's unique limestone soil.

Pick up a bottle of the syrah, then head a mile down the road to La Forêt ([laforetrestaurant.com](http://laforetrestaurant.com)), a charming creekside restaurant in a historic former hotel, for an introduction to the local culinary scene. Widely considered to be the best French restaurant in the city – and, without question, better value than Michelin-starred Chez TJ in central San José – specialties here include wild boar, venison, bison and elk, all dressed in decadent sauces.

If you don't plan to settle for anything less than a Michelin star, fear not – San José has you covered there, too. Head to the city's Little Portugal neighbourhood (Portuguese immigrants began settling in the Santa Clara Valley in the 1850s, and their Old World influence is especially noticeable in the city's food and wine) and make a stop at Adega ([adegarest.com](http://adegarest.com)). This is the only Portuguese restaurant in the US to have



▲ Farm to fork: San Pedro Square Market, in downtown San José, is a foodie hotspot

▶ Taste award-winning wines at Alamitos Vineyards



court, from Korean barbecue, ramen and Taiwanese street-food snacks to bingfen, a refreshing Sichuan dessert. For more upmarket Chinese food, the ornate iChina ([ichinarestaurant.com](http://ichinarestaurant.com)) even has a virtual-reality private dining room, as well as an afternoon tea that features a tower of French-Asian fusion pastries and dim sum.

San José shines when it comes to the arts, too. There are nearly a dozen theatres within walking distance of one another in the downtown area, showing everything from improvised comedy and plays to concerts and opera, with live shows every night of the week. Presenting a modern take

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a Michelin star, and it serves up traditional dishes such as bacalhau (salted cod) and sardines, paired with the largest collection of Portuguese wines outside Portugal.

San José is also home to the largest Vietnamese population outside Vietnam – as evidenced by the countless banh mi sandwich shops, pho bars and Vietnamese coffee shops in the Little Saigon neighbourhood. And Japantown is thronged with restaurants offering authentic home-cooked Japanese cuisine and late-night karaoke bars.

Even the Westfield Valley Fair shopping mall boasts an impressive collection of Asian staples in the food

on opera, with a diverse cast of emerging stars. Opera San José ([operasj.org](http://operasj.org)) is of particular renown, neatly showcasing its strengths in an upcoming 40th-anniversary programme that includes *Romeo et Juliette*, *The Barber of Seville* and Daniel Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas*.

If you are after attractions on the quirkier side, opt to explore the reportedly haunted Winchester Mystery House ([winchestermysteryhouse.com](http://winchestermysteryhouse.com)), a farmhouse-turned-Victorian-megamansion built by an eccentric widowed heiress over the course of 36 years. Those of a sensitive disposition might prefer a visit to the colourful and

captivating San José Museum of Quilts and Textiles ([sjquiltmuseum.org](http://sjquiltmuseum.org)), while those with little adventurers in tow will enjoy the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum ([egyptianmuseum.org](http://egyptianmuseum.org)), which boasts one of the largest collections of Egyptian artefacts in North America.

When you are ready for a breath of fresh air, do as the locals do and head out into the beautiful landscapes surrounding the city for a spot of hiking or mountain biking. The 10-mile paved Guadalupe River Park Trail connects downtown San José with the San Francisco Bay and there are vibrant public artworks on display along the way. The Cottle Trail, meanwhile, is a more challenging loop that is particularly pretty when the wildflowers are in bloom. If you would prefer someone else to do the legwork, opt to explore the Saratoga foothills on horseback and spend the day trotting through oak forests at Garrod Farms ([garrodfarms.com](http://garrodfarms.com)).

When you have had your fill of all the food, wine, art and natural beauty, head to the utterly tranquil Hakone Estate and Gardens for a dose of calm. One of the oldest Japanese-style gardens in the western hemisphere, the site offers 18 sprawling acres of camellias, azaleas, bamboo forests and even a lily pond, plus a tea pavilion that regularly hosts traditional Japanese tea ceremonies and origami classes for children.

Cherry-blossom season (from late March to early April) is the most popular time to go, but this serene spot is worth visiting all year round. It is the perfect place to sit and ponder your next meal in your new favourite North American city.



Essentials

**Getting there**  
British Airways ([ba.com](http://ba.com)) offers daily non-stop flights from London Heathrow to San José Mineta International Airport

**Where to stay**  
Just 10 minutes from the Googleplex corporate headquarters and Stanford University, the sleek Four Seasons Hotel Silicon Valley at East Palo Alto is an urban oasis offering superb guest facilities and impeccable service. The spa is a standout, with a Himalayan-salt sauna and excellent massages (doubles from £237; [fourseasons.com/siliconvalley](http://fourseasons.com/siliconvalley)). Alternatively, the boutique Hotel Valencia Santana Row is located just 15 minutes from the airport, in the centre of the bustling Santana Row entertainment district, surrounded by great local shopping and dining. The rooftop pool is heated year-round and the Tuscan-inspired design includes wrought-iron chandeliers and embossed plaster walls (doubles from £243; [hotelvalenciasantanarow.com](http://hotelvalenciasantanarow.com))  
Further information: [visitsanjose.org](http://visitsanjose.org)

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