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This Under-the-Radar U.S. Region Has Surfing, Ancient Redwoods, Mountains, and a Rustic Charm

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TRAVEL

This Under-the-Radar U.S. Region Has Surfing, Ancient Redwoods, Mountains, and a Rustic Charm

BY KATE DINGWALL

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Santa Cruz is a surfer's paradise. There are the sizzling city beaches, where students and Silicon Valley types come to soak in the [California](#) sun. Sportier types flock to the coastal city to carve into Monterey Bay's endlessly rolling whitecaps. But on your next trip to Santa Cruz, leave the beach behind and wind up the mountains.

Hundreds of feet above the California coast, vineyards weave in and out of fog-slicked redwoods and curl up the chaparral-dotted hills that overlook Silicon Valley. Buzzing wine bars hide in quiet mountain towns. Tasting rooms inhabit former logging cabins, or new-built architectural wonders that complement the surrounding forests. Welcome to the Santa Cruz Mountains.



Photo: Getty Images

As local rule goes, the wines of the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA (American Viticultural Area) are defined by elevation—grapes must be grown between 400 and 2,600 feet into the mountains.

Which means you're in Chardonnay country. But these aren't the big, rich wines of the Napa Valley. The Santa Cruz Mountains' wines are heavily influenced by the crisp mountain air and drifting ocean breezes, so Chardonnays are shimmeringly mineral, Pinot Noirs are earthy and elegant, and Syrahs drink with freshness and depth.

And while the region is just a short drive from downtown Santa Cruz, there's a remoteness, a rich alpine energy to the region—likely why artists like Joan Baez and Alfred Hitchcock, who wrote *The Birds* while living in the Santa Cruz Mountains, have retreated here to write. Equally enticing: the increasingly award-winning wines and new and noteworthy openings, like the grand La Bahia Hotel & Spa on the coast.

Curious as to the allure? Here are the best places to sip, stay, eat, and explore in the cool California mountains.

Where to Stay

Sand Rock Farm



Photo: Courtesy of Sand Rock Farm

Tucked away in a redwood clearing, this 1800s farmhouse—once home to the first winery in all of Santa Cruz—is home to a cozy B&B, with five rooms outfitted with full ensuite bathrooms and jacuzzi soaker tubs. Craftsmen-era architecture and decor has been carefully upkeep over the century, including a grand redwood fireplace, hand-printed wallpaper, and a hand-carved redwood entrance. In the 1960s, the property's barn (now a sought-after wedding venue) doubled as a jam space for folks like Carlos Santana and the Grateful Dead.

- **Amenities:** Breakfast, Farmhouse, Fire pit, Jacuzzi tubs
- **Address:** 6901 Freedom Blvd., Aptos, CA 95003

BOOK NOW

La Bahia Hotel & Spa



Photo: Courtesy of La Bahia

Set against the picturesque backdrop of the Santa Cruz shoreline, the just-opened La Bahia Hotel & Spa is one of the first five-star hotels to open in the region. The 155-room hotel is the ultimate coastal retreat, blending barefoot California luxury with Spanish coastal architecture. Guests can unwind in the grand Moorish spa, with its indoor and outdoor treatment rooms and a sauna overlooking Monterey Bay. The oceanfront escape was once Neptune's Casino and Casa Del Rey—both glitterati getaways for the California elite in the early 1900s. Architectural details, like a bell tower with a gilded mermaid on top, remain.

- **Amenities:** Restaurant, Bar, Pool, Spa, Hot Tub
- **Address:** 215 Beach Street, Santa Cruz, CA, 95060

BOOK NOW

Where to Taste Wine

Santa Cruz is a relatively small region. Almost all vineyards are family-owned, and even the largest property is tiny by Napa standards. And while the wine scene is small in size, the long, winding mountain roads mean that drive times can be *long*.

Plan out your journey in advance and make reservations—since most vineyards are mom-and-pop projects, proprietors are usually out in the vineyards or making wine, not manning the tasting bar. The below wineries are open for tastings or accept reservations.

If you're dining out for dinner or stopping into a bottle shop, look out for bottles by Kathryn Kennedy (gold-standard, age-worthy Cabernet), Ryan Stirm (exceptional Vermentino), Vocal (single-vineyard Pinot Noir and Cabernet) and Sander & Hem (show-stopping Chardonnay). None are set up for tourism but all are worth trying.

Thomas Fogarty Winery



Photo: Courtesy of Thomas Fogarty Winery

The best time to ascend Skyline Drive, where Thomas Fogarty's vineyards are, is later in the day. The winery sits 2,000 feet above sea level, so as the sun dips, the vineyards above Silicon Valley turn a smudgy shade of pink. The wines are equally compelling—graceful Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs packed with cooling minerality and mountain herbs.

Windy Oaks Estates

Wind through a narrow gully, hang a right, then head up a hill. At the very top, Windy Oaks Estates sits in a forest clearing overlooking all of Monterey Bay. Your best plan is to reserve their ridge picnic. Grab a sandwich (Castelli's is excellent) and dine al fresco, underneath old oak trees between the vines. The winery will provide the tables, chairs, and pairings. While the atmosphere is casual, their wines are serious. The proprietors are Burgundy nerds, and so they tip a hat to the French way of making wines—think lithe, elegant, and finessed wines like Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Storrs Winery



Photo: Courtesy of Storrs Winery

Pam and Steven Storrs are farmers first. Their winery, tucked into a former quarry in Corralitos, is often dotted with babydoll sheep, deer, hawks, and bats, all of whom help preserve the vineyard's biodiversity. Their tasting room, on the other hand, is minimalistic, modern and architecturally minded. Tastings of their Zinfandels, Chardonnays, and Pinot Noir are available in their serene courtyard, or book out the bocce court. The winery will provide you with a tote bag of wines to help fuel the fun.

Lester Estates Wine

Lester Wine Estates doesn't have just one winemaker. Instead, proprietor Steve Johnson tapped five of his favorite local winemakers to produce wines they love. All are exceptional, though start with the sparkling wines. Tastings are held either in quiet clearings of ancient trees or in the barn—founder Dan Lester was a scholar and explorer, and artifacts from his travels, including dugout canoes, arrowheads, and Amazonian carvings, decorate the space.

Alfaro Family Vineyards



Photo: Kate Dingwall

In 1997, Richard Alfaro bought a 75-acre apple farm in Corralitos and started planting grape vines on it. Now, he farms the estate while Ryan, a breezy, surfer-cool 30-something, handles the winemaking. The wines—Chardonnay, Syrah, Gruner Veltiner, and Cabernet Sauvignon—are loved by locals, while Ryan's side project, Farm Wines, is gaining notoriety with wine nerds across the country. Sip all of the above on a patio overlooking the vineyards.

Madson Wines

In a sunny strip of Santa Cruz, beside an organic grocer and a few breweries, winemaker Cole Thomas is producing some of the region's most serious and cerebral Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in an urban winery. The California energy is apparent—a chalkboard in the tasting room advertises both surfboard swaps and sips of Chardonnay. Instead of owning vineyards, Thomas cherry picks fruit from the best of the region, including Ascona Vineyard at the summit of the mountain and Peter Martin Reyes, one of the most prestigious vineyards in the region. The result: cool, distinctly California wines—laid-back but intentional, French-inspired but full of sunshine.

Ridge

In 1976, French wine merchant Stephen Spurrier asked a panel of experts to blind taste bottles from both France and California, then a budding wine region, and pick a winner. In a grand upset, California wines, including Ridge's 1971 Montebello, were adored. Montebello is still one of the more prized bottles of the wine world. You can try it, plus a range of excellent Zinfandels and Cabernet Sauvignons, on the winery's patio, perched high above Silicon Valley.

Beauregard Vineyards

Beauregard Vineyards' home base is a redwood cabin, once home to The Lost Weekend, a smoke-filled local haunt specializing in cold beer and beef jerky. When it shut in the '80s and transformed into a tasting room, the jukebox left, but the redwood interiors were carefully kept. There, winemaker Ryan Beauregard pours carbonic Pinot Noirs that taste of forest freshness.

Where to Eat

Alice's Restaurant

As you ascend Skyline Boulevard, drivers, motorcyclists, and horseback riders will pull over to fuel up at Alice's Restaurant. It was built in the early 1900s as a general store for loggers. In the 1950s, a restaurant opened, focusing on stick-to-your-ribs food for weary travellers. By the '60s, the hippie movement had drifted in and Joan Baez, Hunter S. Thompson, and Neil Young, who lived up the road, were calling themselves regulars. Wines are local and the menu is still hearty: BLTs and burgers are the move. The latter can, of course, be customized with gluten-free buns or Wagyu patties—this *is* California.

Cantine Winepub

After the workday, winemakers congregate at Cantine, a self-described wine 'pub' in Aptos. There's always something local open, plus treasures from further afield and craft brews on tap if you need a reprieve from wine. Stop in for a *cinq-a-sept* and don't ignore thoughtful plates, like confit tomatoes with grilled focaccia.

Mentone

Housed in a rosy pink barn, Mentone is Chef David Kinch's Aptos ode to southern Italian and French cooking. Flame-kissed pizzas are showered in summer truffles, grilled *tripa* is served over polenta, and pillows of gnocchi are crowned with charred octopus. The wine list is packed with global gems but, when in Santa Cruz, sip on Marty Mathis' Spanish-accented Albarino or Big Basin's gripping Pinot Noir.

What to Do

The Mystery Spot

In these ancient forests, gravity can sometimes become a suggestion. At least, that's the tale that tour guides at the Mystery Spot, a campy, quirky attraction built around a gravitational anomaly first discovered in the 1930s, will tell you. Some visitors say it's the byproduct of an alien invasion, others think it's caused by a hole in the ozone. Whether you find it fact or fiction, a stop here is a fun way to round out an afternoon.

Tour Urban Tasting Rooms

If you can't get up into the mountains, winemakers understand—many of the best have set up tasting rooms in Santa Cruz. Pop into [Birichino](#) for a glass or tasting before dinner in the city. Owners Alex Krause and John Locke cherry-pick grapes from their favorite vineyards around the country and turn them into inquisitive, expressive wines.

Also downtown is [Big Basin's](#) satellite tasting room and tapas bars. Their excellent high-altitude Pinot Noirs, Syrahs, and Chardonnays are made just outside of Big Basin State Park, and shine beside bites of flame-kissed Argentinian empanadas.

In Aplos, [Sante Arcangeli's](#) John Benedetti makes precise, expressive Pinot Noirs and serves them in cafe-style seating on a busy shopping strip.

Visit the Big Basin National Park



Photo: Getty Images

California's oldest state park has miles of trails that weave through ancient Redwoods and sage-brush-covered hills. For more casual hikers, the Redwood Loop Trail is under a mile long.

What to Pack

While Santa Cruz may be sunny during the day, the temperature will dip and drop as the day goes on. Layer up with a light knit or jacket. Santa Cruz is less buttoned-up than say, Napa, so if you're dining out, skip the high heels and lean into the region's beach-chic dress code.

How to Get There

Santa Cruz is an hour's drive from San Francisco, or 40 minutes from San Jose. Trains from the former will bring you to downtown Santa Cruz in just over an hour. Within the Santa Cruz mountains, Ubers are sparse, so co-ordinate travel ahead of time.

SEE FULL ARTICLE [HERE](#).