

Autumn in Downtown Santa Barbara

The best time of year to visit Santa Barbara is early to mid autumn. The temperate climate provides you with blue skies, clear air and a view across the Pacific to the Channel Islands. Stay at the Simpson House Inn for a Slow Food Santa Barbara recommended hotel – included in the stay is a full vegetarian breakfast and evening hors d'oeuvres featuring local Santa Barbara wines.

If you'd rather venture to town for breakfast, downtown is walking distance. A casual yet sophisticated breakfast, the Pierre LaFond Bistro is located on State Street and opens at 7am. They serve bagel sandwiches made with organic eggs and a host of seasonal, fresh ingredients in addition to the recommended breakfast burritos, featuring creative ingredients such as sautéed leeks and Pasilla Chilis.

Pierre LaFond is situated right on State Street. If you turn right leaving the bistro, you will encounter all sorts of shops including the Paseo Nuevo mall just two blocks up and across the street.

To your left is a walk to the Pacific Ocean, Stearns Wharf and the beach. Stearns Wharf has the Santa Barbara Shellfish company where you can purchase locally caught crabs and other seafood.

On Tuesday afternoons the Santa Barbara Farmers Market takes over downtown. It's a great way to meet locals and get a feel of Santa Barbara as it is quite a popular way to spend the afternoon. There is usually a variety of street musicians and plenty to sample.

For lunch, another great spot on State Street is the Natural Café. Order at the counter off a vegan friendly, mostly vegetarian menu, which includes fruit and fruit juice smoothies or creamy shakes (soy milk available upon request). They serve traditional, hearty lunch food with a healthy twist, like tempeh tacos or baked potatoes stuffed with steamed vegetables and tahini ginger sauce.

A few blocks up is the Santa Barbara Museum of Art which, although small, usually has a tasteful collection of work. The Santa Barbara Botanical gardens are 10 minutes away, located in Mission Canyon (a great place to find trail heads for hiking, as well). It's dedicated to the research, education and conservation display of California Native Plants.

For dinner, Bouchon is the place to go for seasonal, fresh ingredients as well as a regional wine menu that has earned Wine Spectator magazine's Award of Excellence. Chef Josh Brown draws influence from Thomas Keller (French Laundry), Daniel Boulud (Restaurant Daniel) and Alice Waters (Chez Panisse).

Finish the evening with dessert at Epiphany and if they aren't having live music there, after you've finished your seasonal fresh fruit tart walk over to SoHo and catch some live Jazz to finish the evening.