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TRAVEL & EXPERIENCES

Why so many L.A. people are drawn to this tiny, rustic town north of Santa Barbara



The many views to be seen of Los Alamos, its locals and its visitors. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

When you visit a tiny ranch town like Los Alamos in the Santa Ynez Valley, you're not just visiting a charming travel destination, but someone's home. And right now, this home is beckoning its guests with the scent of meat.

It's just before 8 o'clock on a misty morning and a line has already formed behind [Bell's](#) restaurant for the twice-monthly pop-up event [Priedite Barbecue](#). A mix of locals and out-of-town visitors have made their way to the back lot for a taste of pitmaster Nicholas Priedite's brisket, pork ribs and ranchero sausages, all cooked in a 650-gallon smoker and served "til sold out," as a flier reads.



From left, Alfredo Carrillo, Ron Carrari, and Steve Allbritton sit at a sheltered table along Bell St. in Los Alamos. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)



Mindy Gayer reads with her son, Oliver Rounsevell, at Bar Alamo, left, and a staff member passes through the door to the kitchen during dinner rush at Bell's, right. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

Kids are playing, beer taps are flowing and neighbors are chatting about everything from opening night of Los Alamos Theatre Group's newest musical to the Los Alamos Old Days celebration happening later this month (there'll be a chili cookoff, cowboy hats aplenty and "the greatest little small town parade"). I gleefully walk up to the Priedite canopy to pick up my order, which includes the special of the day (a pita filled with glistening lamb made by Priedite's colleague Logan Jones of [Tamar Central Coast Shawarma](#)) and stand at a wine barrel table to gobble up my breakfast feast.

This whole scene — a young pitmaster teaming up with a Michelin-starred French restaurant to serve an innovative menu in a rustic, everybody-knows-your-name setting — exemplifies some of the magic happening in Los Alamos, a three-hour drive north from Los Angeles.

From the moment you spot [Skyview's](#) lemon-yellow "motel" sign off the 101 Freeway, Los Alamos strikes you with its juxtaposition of old and new. A walk down Bell Street, the town's one main drag, can feel like you're stepping into a scene from "High Noon," where Gary Cooper struts down the middle of the road and Grace Kelly runs breathlessly through the train depot. And yet these seven blocks are filled with modern-day energy — a patchwork of shops, restaurants and wineries seem to work almost in tandem to bring people experiences they can't find elsewhere. There's [Full of Life Flatbread](#), which helped revitalize the Los Alamos restaurant scene in the early 2000s. [Bob's Well Bread](#), an artisanal bakery-café set in a former 1920s gas station. Pico, a restaurant in the [Los Alamos General Store](#), which has an always-changing, farmer-driven menu. On the retail front, there's Campover, Bodega and Elder Flat.



An old gas pump seen in front of The Maker's Son restaurant, left, and an electric vehicle charger outside of the Depot bar, right. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)



A biker waves while traveling through Los Alamos down Bell Street. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

The town is often described as a “hidden gem” by travel influencers, who post snapshots of the quirky street signs (“You are exactly where you are supposed to be” and “Please lock emotional baggage in vehicle”), the bright-orange ‘60s French bicycles that Skyview loans its guests and glasses of wine sipped in front of a backdrop of sunlit olive trees and rosemary. Los Alamos has recently been hailed by writers with descriptors like “California’s new culinary destination to know” ([Vogue](#)), “the best-kept secret on California’s Central Coast” ([Travel + Leisure](#)) and “California’s hottest micro-destination” ([Venue Report](#)).

Still, it’s Los Alamos’ history and character that makes it what it is, according to those who live and work there. Spend time in Los Alamos and you’ll hear community members talking about protecting their neighborly time together, how they cherish celebrating birthdays and supporting each other’s businesses.

“I don’t like when people come to Los Alamos and say, ‘I love this place! Let’s change it,’” says Stephanie Mutz, a Los Alamos resident and owner of Sea Stephanie Fish, which delivers just-caught sea urchins to restaurants up and down the California coast. “We all need to be respectful of the pioneers before us, the people who have lived here for 30 or 40 years. We want to keep the growth slow.”

The story of Los Alamos, which is Spanish for “the cottonwoods” and refers to the massive shade trees that line some of the streams in the Santa Ynez Valley, begins in the 1870s. Ranchers John Bell and James Shaw purchased 14,000 acres of land and planned out a town that became a stagecoach stop.



The Depot, a bar and music venue, left, stands on the west end of downtown, and a serene scene as fog rolls above the headstones at Los Alamos Cemetery, right. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

Many relics of that era can be seen in Los Alamos today with the Southern Pacific Railroad train depot being the only surviving one of its kind in the area. The restored [1880 Union](#), which now houses events and weddings, was the town's original Union Hotel and one of the locations where Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson filmed the music video for their song "[Say Say Say](#)." Locals often rattle off town tidbits like these with pride. Stephan Bedford, creator of Bedford Winery, tells me legend has it that Salomon Pico, one of the bandits that inspired the legend of Zorro (and the name for Pico restaurant), found refuge in Los Alamos' hilly canyons. He speaks wistfully about Mary Vigoroso, the first female winemaker in the area whose vines still thrive today. "That history should not be forgotten," he said.

Chances are, it won't be, thanks to the generations of folks in Los Alamos working to keep its small-town magic alive. What locals understand is that while anyone can walk Bell Street in minutes, to really know the town, you have to slow down and pay attention.

Where to stay



The sun sinks over the Skyview Hotel's pool. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

At the top of the hill, roadside motel [Skyview](#) has been restored and renovated as a boutique hotel (rooms start at \$189 weekdays, \$379 weekends), where guests can slide into a plush booth at [Norman](#) restaurant, swim up to the bar in the retro pool or borrow a Linus bike to explore the area. The deck overlooks the town with sweeping views of the valley and has the distinction of being one of the best places to see rocket launches at nearby [Vandenberg Space Force Base](#).

On Bell Street, [Bar Alamo](#) greets visitors at the ranch-style [Alamo Motel](#), a property of Shelter Social Club (which is also behind Ojai's midcentury jewel Capri Hotel and the charming Ojai Rancho Inn). Rooms start at \$120 weekdays, \$240 weekends. For bed & breakfast fans, [the Victorian Mansion](#) offers the chance to stay in a building from 1864 — each of the six rooms has a different theme, from a Parisian artist loft to the captain's quarters on a pirate ship (rooms start at \$245 weekdays, \$315 weekends).



The Alamo Motel bears a horseshoe layout of rooms, lined with a variety of cacti. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)



A room at the Alamo Motel, left, complete with a claw-footed bathtub, right. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

Another lodging option? Stay in an Airbnb attached to one of the local businesses. There are quite a few: [Mercantile's cowboy-themed apartments](#) (rooms start at \$275 weekdays, \$410 weekends), the quaint and airy [cottages](#) behind Bob's Well Bread (rooms start at \$225), [Bodega House](#) on the property of wine and beer garden [Bodega](#) (rooms start at \$389) and the [Greenhouse Cottage](#) in a beautiful garden behind the Elder Flat Farm Shop (rooms start at \$169 weekday, \$269 weekends).

What to eat



The Santa Barbara Sea Urchin, a specialty dish at Bell's. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

A bit on Bell's

Talk about Los' Alamos' modern culinary scene and the conversation will undoubtedly turn to Bell's. As soon as I walked through the blue door and into the checker-floored dining room, it was clear: This is why people in L.A. would drive all the way to Los Alamos for a dinner reservation and then drive back home.

When it opened five years ago, this French-inspired bistro quickly developed a reputation for stellar food, warm hospitality and, in a few years, the distinction of earning a Michelin star. But there's a bigger story here about community.

Before opening Bell's, husband-wife duo Greg and Daisy Ryan worked in restaurants around the world, from Per Se in New York to Jeffrey's and Josephine House in Austin, Texas. When their son Henry was born, they made the decision to move to the Santa Ynez Valley, the place where Daisy grew up, and start a restaurant of their own.

As soon as the couple toured the former Bell Street Farm restaurant space that was for sale, they fell in love. "The walls have feelings," said Greg Ryan. "It has a history."

Building relationships has been central to their success. But when Greg and Daisy reflect back at how it all happened, they can't help but talk

about their neighbors. It was Clark Staub of Full of Life Flatbread who first welcomed the Ryans, who'd been Friday-night regulars at his restaurant down the street. He offered to help establish them in Los Alamos, connecting them with other small business owners in the scene.



Co-owners of Bell's, Daisy Ryan, left, and Greg Ryan stand in the patio space of their restaurant. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)



Friends, locals and returning diners frequent Bell's, which has become a social hub for the community in the five years it's been in Los Alamos. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

Today, with a commitment to showcasing local ingredients, the menu at Bell's reads almost like a guest list for a neighborhood potluck. Produce comes from Finley Family Farms nearby. Mutz of [Sea Stephanie Fish](#) dives for their sea urchin in Santa Barbara and hand-delivers her catch to the kitchen. (Order the mille crepe with urchin and Regiis Ova Hybrid caviar. Luxurious dishes like this sit comfortably on the lunch menu side by side with egg salad sandwiches, vinegary salads and fries.) Wild Burgundy snails are served with baguettes baked a few doors down at [Bob's Well Bread](#). The prix fixe dinner menu showcases Drake [Whitcraft's](#) wine, Mutz's urchins, lettuce that the [Finleys](#) grow and lambs that [Motley Crew Ranch](#) raises. As a way to give back to the community, the Ryans created the nonprofit [Feed the Valley](#) to mobilize the resources of independent restaurants to help fight food insecurity in the Santa Ynez Valley.

“I often say it’s not my food — it’s their food too,” says Daisy, referring to the kaleidoscope of neighbors who’ve contributed to the restaurant. “We have this lovely opportunity to showcase what all of our friends do. The restaurant is the platform that brings all of these fabulous people together.”

More places to dine

[Bob’s Well Bread](#) bakes up classic and creative loaves from brioche and corn rye to pain aux lardons and olive fougasse. It also fills its shelves with pastries and serve rustic breakfast toasts, egg-in-a-frame, Reuben sandwiches and croque monsieurs. Chef Cameron Ingle at [Pico](#) at Los Alamos General Store, who previously cooked at Blue Hill at Stone Barns and Bestia and Bavel, prepares entrees of duck breast with Finley Farm corn and whole branzino with summer squash, along with a rainbow of local vegetables. Bring the kids — they can meet the chickens in the garden.



Bob's Well Bread baked goods include pasties and croissants. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)



Don't miss [Full of Life Flatbread](#) for pizza topped with n'duja and housemade hot honey baked in the oven the owners built by hand out of local stone and sand. Los Alamos residents tell me a popular hangout spot is [Charlies Place](#) (order the legendary hangover burrito). Many people also look forward to the weekly emails from [Plenty on Bell's](#) chef and owner Jesper Johansson, who shares the special menu for his popular Friday night suppers.

Check out the shop at [Bodega](#) for a selection of wines from as close as Ashkahn Chardonnay in Los Alamos to a Pinot Gris from the Other Right in Southern Australia stocked alongside hats, ceramics and gifts like Piecework Puzzles Spaghetti Western 1,000 pieces of fun and Red Clay's Hot Honey. Walk through their wine and beer garden to find their greenhouse bungalow stocked with plants and gardening tools or stay for a drink and to play a game of bocce.

Where to shop



The mane of one of the horses at Elder Flat Farm catches the last sun rays, left, and the farm's owner Carla Malloy sits for a portrait, right. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

During the pandemic, Carla Malloy would sell produce and flowers from an upcycled '83 Miley horse trailer. She gained such a following that the bricks-and-mortar [Elder Flat Farm Shop](#) was born. A true family-run business (you might find owner Malloy's kids manning the register before heading out to rodeo practice), the shop carries an array of local products such as Coastal Coffee, Dart Coffee, Santa Barbara Hives Honey, Sideyard Shrubs and Christiana's Preserves from Paso Robles, along with an assortment of California cheeses and charcuterie. Visitors will sometimes buy cheese and a bottle of wine simply to sit outside the farm store and enjoy them. "Our local community is small enough that people can text me and ask us to hold eggs for them," Malloy says. "I love that connection."

Treasures fill the original [Los Alamos Depot Mall](#) inside the only surviving Pacific Coast Railway depot built in the 1880s. The building now houses the antique mall where 25 dealers stock the 25,000 square feet with racks of vintage clothing, jewelry, furniture and accessories. Take a peek into the space where the Los Alamos community [theater group](#) performs and grab a drink with the locals at the Depot Bar.



Follow the sandwich board sign on the corner of Bell Street at Centennial to find [Campover](#), a light-filled cabin that evokes the feeling of co-owners Lindsey Larson-Woitunski and Brett Woitunski's favorite weekend getaways along the California coast. The Woitunskis stock the space with modern home goods from blankets to pottery in natural tones from independent designers. Look for Hasami ceramics, hand-carved wooden spoons by Connor Hogan and Amor Mythos candles.

Continue on Bell Street to enter [T&T Local Artisans Enterprise](#) in a building that was once a bus garage. This artisan marketplace features natural burl wood furniture, ceramics, paintings and jewelry by local artists. Browsing the expansive space, I saw wire-wrapped rings by designer 17-year old Abby Plott displayed alongside a landscape painting by Suzanna Huska and moss wall hangings and terrariums by Michelle Kuhl. For more vintage treasures (think vintage granny flower quilts, antique mirrors and indigo textiles), check out [Sisters Gifts and Home](#), an eclectic shop in a 1880s house. Then explore vintage books and collectibles at [Keanes Eclectic](#) and you are likely to meet one of the town historians, Denis Keane, who has been operating his shop there for more than 25 years.

What to do



The Santa Ynez Valley's vineyards have a reputation for making some of the best wines in California — and you can see why on a visit to Los Alamos. For wine tasting in town, head to [A Tribute to Grace](#) for their focus on exploring expressions of Grenache. Walk over to [Lo-Fi Wines](#), where the labels look like retro vinyl records (the 16 current offerings range from Chenin Blanc to Gamay Noir). Taste the range of pinot noirs at the [Lumen](#) tasting room inside the Los Alamos General Store building. Head to [Bedford](#) for wine tasting served with a side of town history with owner Stephan Bedford.

You might also plan a trip to town around some of the yearly events from the [Los Alamos Old Days](#) events and [Car Show](#) to the [Taste of the Santa Ynez Valley](#) and [Old Santa Ynez Days Rodeo](#). On a recent visit to Los Alamos, I happened to see meticulously restored vintage cars up and down Bell Street as part of an event organized by the Pierce-Arrow Society. A time capsule with a dreamy window into the true old days before our cars began to sound like floating spaceships.

If you're looking for some open spaces, head to [Los Alamos Park](#) to picnic or play a game of horseshoe. You can also explore the Los Alamos [Cemetery, where you can read gravestones with](#) detailed life spans: "Esther A Patterson Oct 22, 1896 aged 83 years, 3 months, 23 days".

Beyond Los Alamos



The east side of Bell Street, as the sun dips down behind some trees in the evening. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)

Explore further into the full Santa Ynez Valley. Driving from town to town along the curvy freeways feels like an adventure. Look for super blooms of wildflowers in the spring and bold fall colors. Soon the [Chumash Museum & Cultural Center](#) will open. If the beauty of the area's vineyards and ranches make you want to see from a higher vantage, [Vino Vaqueros](#) Ranch plans private horseback riding experiences. Start and/or end your visit with your drive with a visit to [Cold Spring Tavern](#) for a tri-tip sandwich and one of their "Stagecoach" barrel-aged Manhattan cocktails to bookend your Santa Barbara Wine Country adventure at an Old West stagecoach stop.

Among the vineyards of the Santa Barbara Wine Country, visitors will find the Danish-style town of Solvang known for cute buildings and butter cookies. Stroll around Los Olivos, once a stop on the stagecoach route, now home to dozens of wine tasting rooms or to the boutique wine tasting rooms at the [Lompoc Wine Ghetto](#).

With the Santa Ynez Mountains to the south and the San Rafael Mountains to the north, driving along the winding freeways and country roads through vineyards of this idyllic winemaking region feels mystical at times. Step outside at night, look up at the sky to bathe in the moon glow, under a blanket of constellations that have illuminated the sky over this valley of Chumash land since before the arrival of the early California settlers.



Paul Whitaker pours Jamie Gage a glass of wine at the Skyview. (Wesley Lapointe / Los Angeles Times)