All Spice

This quaint, two-story Victorian with burgundy trim is tucked back from El Camino Real, so pay attention or completely miss the almost hidden entrance. After a warm greeting, you will be led to a seat in one of their cozy interconnecting rooms. Then take the time to peruse Chef Sachin Chopra's superb carte of California-centric Indian fare. A roaring fireplace, soft colors, and modern art are an idyllic backdrop for tasty starters like an oblong, golden-brown bread fritter wrapped around spiced potatoes, cheese, and mushrooms, offered with mint chutney for an authentically light and cooling union. Main courses shine, as in tender, well-seasoned duck breast artistically arranged with chestnut purée, deep green dollops of nasturtium leaf coulis, and *berbere*-spiced potato gratin. Each element is not just delicious, but a thoughtful and sublime balance of smoky, sweet, and salty flavors. End with the chef's tropically inspired treats, including a glass "snowglobe" of airy lemongrass cake, mango custard, and coconut sorbet, all sealed beneath a white chocolate lid—until it is melted tableside when the server pours a rich orange-lemongrass- and white chocolate-sauce. It's date-night certified!

Ame

The St. Regis hotel is where Napa-based husband-and-wife team Hiro Sono and Lissa Doumani serve up their distinct creations in the City by the Bay. Ame's look is appropriately slick for its setting on the lobby level of this concrete and glass tower. An eastern vibe accents the sexy space with mesquite wood floors, a red lacquer wall, and smoked glass wine cellar. The sashimi bar is where those raw treats emerge from—think seasonal plates like thinly sliced amberjack ceviche with avocado, slivers of charred Fresno chili, and finger lime dressing. As at Terra and Bar Terra, influences from Japan, Europe, and America steer this skillfully rendered cuisine. Bruschetta topped with a plump orb of creamy burrata is drizzled with olive oil and arranged with a mélange of brassica and pungent *bagna cauda* vinaigrette. Lobster tail is grilled to sweet and tender perfection; then dressed with a lemony butter sauce enriched with sea urchin. The petite "individual" huckleberry pie may get you out of having to share; the crust is flaky, fruit is bright, and it is all lusciously plated with tangy Meyer lemon curd and crème fraîche ice cream. Casual French sib Urchin Bistrot recently opened in the Mission.

Auberge du Soleil

Overlooking miles of vineyards and the stunning Mayacamas Mountains, the setting of this upscale auberge is quite literally picture-perfect. So it should come as no surprise that while the interior dining room is sumptuous in a laid-back California way with its timber accents and soft yellow color scheme, most diners prefer to sit *en plein air* on the expansive porch. Executive Chef Robert Curry surpasses the challenge of ensuring the idyllic surroundings do not eclipse the cuisine; the cooking here is stunning in its own right. Expect to partake in ocean-raised Kona kampachi crudo, served over morsels of sushi rice and garnished with ripe avocado, strips of *kampyo*, drops of nori purée, and a succulent Hong Kong vinaigrette of soy, zesty ginger, and green onion. Local quail is presented pink, its crisped skin flecked with black pepper, and served alongside a cool salad of black quinoa, fresh hearts of palm, silken chanterelles, and Romano beans. A lick of well-seasoned jus is the ultimate finishing touch. After dinner, sit back and savor the view over an impeccably crafted dessert such as the delicate roulade of pumpkin genoise and soft cinnamon marshmallow with espresso ice cream.

Aziza

The flavors of Morocco get a contemporary upgrade at Mourad Lahlou's lovely and exotic restaurant, nestled in a quiet corner of the Outer Richmond. The attractive, dimly lit dining room is divided into a variety of niches, from an alcove of booths and banquettes in front, to a Moroccan-style lounge with low seating in the rear. Bartenders stir up a host of quenching cocktails at a teal side bar, producing striking combinations like cantaloupe with pisco, pink peppercorn, and Chartreuse. Sweet and savory elements intertwine in the skillfully prepared food, like a tangy lentil soup accented by ripe Medjool dates. The *basteeya*, a masterful signature, envelops rich duck confit, caramelized onions, olives, and raisins in a flaky phyllo pastry with hints of cinnamon and orange-flower water. Fluffy couscous arrives with caramelized cauliflower, soft currants, and spicy *harissa*; while tender lamb loin and belly gain depth from wilted chard, apple purée, and roasted beets. A nightly tasting menu offers a full tour of the fare. From neighborhood couples to European tourists, the accommodating staff makes everyone feel comfortable, and are happy to explain an unusual dish or endorse a compelling drink.

Bouchon

Classic French fare feels fresher than ever at Thomas Keller's exuberant, theatrical brasserie, located just down the street from his iconic French Laundry. The chic dining room is the spitting image of a Parisian bistro, complete with lush potted palms, perfectly polished brass, and massive mirrors. An animated crowd energizes the space with laughter and conversation, and every plush banquette and stool at the bustling bar is full. You'll want to grab a hunk or two of a perfectly fresh and crusty *epi* baguette as you peruse the appealing menu of pristinely executed favorites like steak frites and French onion soup. A warm chickpea salad tossed with chewy and sweet Medjool dates, tart pickled garlic, and grilled merguez is a light start. Then, move on to the decadently tender roast leg of lamb with quince and fall squash, or the meaty coquille St. Jacques nestled with mushroom duxelles in a perfectly browned crust. While desserts like profiteroles and lemon tart may seem simple, you're not likely to find better execution anywhere else. Nor are you likely to encounter a friendlier staff: attentive, cheerful, and unobtrusive, they're polar opposites of the snobby Parisian waiters of legend.

Campton Place

Dress up and lower your voice, Campton Place is refined, serene, and quietly formal from first glance. Lodged in the namesake Taj Hotel, the dining room blends intimate booths and tables against a wall of windows with a beige and cream color scheme, as if to heighten the effect of dramatic florals and a blown glass orchid chandelier hanging from the coffered ceiling. That sense of refinery greeting each guest at the door is true to the contemporary menu, which hints of Indian spices yet prizes superb skill and taste over drama or innovation. The art of combining delicate flavor and texture is clear from the first spoonful of velvety sunchoke velouté poured tableside over toasted hazelnuts, micro herbs, and woodsy matsutake mushrooms. Expertly balanced dishes include day boat scallops that are plump, succulent, and seared just until the very moment of readiness, served with Madras-spiced potatoes, Brussels sprout leaves, and turmeric-scented whey powder and cream. Meat dishes feature spice-rubbed grilled lamb tenderloin over a streak of boldly seasoned eggplant purée redolent of *garam masala*, cumin, and cardamom, accompanied by caramelized pineapple, mint-flecked millet and pea pods.

Chez TJ

The modern Google office building next door may symbolize the current trajectory of Mountain View, but Chez TJ, housed in a quaint, historic bungalow, remains delightfully analog. Its warren of narrow rooms, each boasting its own style, is brought together by hand-blown colored glass lamps and professional servers in sharp black suits. A favorite for celebratory couples on date-night or suits gathering for business, it offers some of the area's finest food. The nightly chef's tasting menu dances ably through numerous styles and cuisines, from a Spanish-inspired dish of *jamón ibérico* and beef tendon chips over romesco sauce, to a fluffy blini topped with duck confit and quenelle of Sauternes-infused duck liver mousse. Moist and flaky halibut cheeks are served over streaks of onion soubise, pickled mushrooms and shallots, and sweet English peas, then topped with a rich oxtail ragout. A palate-cleansing glass of house-made hibiscus-rose soda is a gateway to the excellent desserts. Try a slice of the moist banana sponge cake with banana-chrysanthemum mousse and intense strawberry sorbet; or the Valrhona chocolate mousse with grapes, pistachio paste, and gold-dusted chocolate pearls.

Commis

A quiet, serious retreat on a busy Oakland thoroughfare, Commis is a destination for those seeking thoughtful and refined cuisine in the East Bay. Though Chef/owner James Syhabout has opened multiple casual follow-ups, it remains his flagship—with a long, narrow room that draws the eye to the calm, methodical team working diligently to the strains of '80s pop in the open kitchen. Don't fret if you get assigned a counter seat—they're the rare kind that are actually comfortable enough for a long meal. At $95, the 10-course tasting menu is one of the Bay Area's most affordable, with strong kitchen chops demonstrated in dishes like gently smoked scallops twirled with tart rhubarb and peppery radish, or tender asparagus topped with creamy trout mousse. A pungent tisane of button mushrooms will whet your appetite for the beautifully cooked lamb saddle with crunchy grains and Brussels sprout purée. The wine list emphasizes pinot noir and riesling, fine pairings for the path-breaking food. Dessert saves some of the best courses for last: both the vanilla ice with Meyer lemon and orange foam and the creamy parsnip pudding with crisp sour apples and sweet caramel sauce will linger in the memory.

Farmhouse Inn and Restaurant

The steep roads winding through the rugged landscape to this quaint yellow colonial heightens the anticipation of what is sure to be a great meal. The staff does everything in their power to assure every guest's enjoyment. Each of several dining rooms is polished and very attractive, with French doors, coffered ceilings, a crackling fireplace, and mirrors with whitewashed log frames. The setting, carefully orchestrated service, and most of all Chef Steve Litke's superb cooking have made this farmhouse a renowned destination. Inventiveness and sublime quality appear on the plate again and again, beginning with mushroom soup capped with foam (an outstanding version of mushroom cappuccino); or *burrata alla panna*, an orb of mozzarella stuffed with whipped cream served with olive oil-braised leeks, chanterelles, mustardy breadcrumbs, and trumpet royale chips. Heartier options include the spoon-tender thigh confit and pan-roasted breast of Grimaud Farms guinea hen accompanied by mushroom-studded bread pudding and truffled root vegetable gravy. The best way to handle dessert is just get one of each—don't miss the autumnal apple pie à la mode with sticky cider caramel and *mimolette* ice cream.