When you touch down in the creative enclave of Santa Fe, New Mexico, you're immediately struck by the purple mountains, earthy red adobe and golden chamisa. But it's not just the landscape that's colorful in this mountain-ringed town.

Santa Fe is charged by a vibrant culinary scene, which blends big-city technique with a northern New Mexican tradition that calls upon its varied Spanish, Mediterranean, Mexican and Pueblo roots. The spicy backbone of its dishes—driven by the pride of the region, its red and green chilies—is the origin of the Santa Fe saying, "You come for the green, but you stay for the red."

The best time to take it all in is during the Santa Fe Wine & Chile Fiesta, when 90 wineries descend on the city with a population of just under 70,000. Local chefs create inimitable wine experiences, like last year's Tablas Creek wine luncheon at the Allan Houser Studio and Sculpture Garden. One of the nation's most influential Apache artists, Houser is just one of the many creative standouts who call Santa Fe home.

Works from others like Georgia O'Keeffe and Gustave Baumann can be found at the New Mexico Museum of Art. Fans of O'Keeffe's bold colors and organic shapes can also visit the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, as well as her home and studio in Abiquiu by appointment.
Food in Santa Fe is equally unforgettable, done up or dressed down. At The Compound Restaurant, Chef and owner Mark Kiffin plays with modern presentations of ingredients introduced to the region by the Spanish. During last year’s Fiesta, he served South Texas venison alongside a vertical of Heitz Cellar’s Martha’s Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley.

The city’s many inviting, upscale hotels are usually a safe bet for dinner too. At Julia, Chef Todd Hall serves up a steakhouse-inspired menu at the charmingly “haunted” La Posada de Santa Fe. His creamy foie gras appetizer pairs beautifully with Cakebread’s Napa Valley Chardonnay.

Argentine expat Chef Juan Bechanski of the Rosewood Inn of the Anasazi reimagines traditional Southwestern ingredients with whimsy, as in caprese (tomato and mozzarella) and buffalo-meat empanadas paired with Belle Glos Las Alturas Pinot Noir. La Plazuela at La Fonda serves a dish of wild boar with green Hatch chile-apple chutney that’s hearty enough to match a top-shelf California Cabernet Sauvignon.

You can buy fresh or roasted chilies at the Santa Fe Farmers Market in the Railyard District, but Tia Sofia’s is the locals’ favorite destination for the famed chilies. You’ll want to order your burrito or huevos rancheros smothered in chilies and “Christmas style.” If you’re like me, you’ll find that both the green and the red are convincing enough to make you stay. —Christina Pellegrini