

40 Outstanding Things To Do This December In San Francisco

Happy December, San Francisco! Here's a deep-dive into the best local holiday craft fairs, Christmas performances, tree lightings, and more to close out 2023 in style.



JAMIE FERRELL - STAFF WRITER · NOVEMBER 27, 2023



Via [Fairmont San Francisco](#)

December in the SF Bay Area brings us countless holiday displays and seasonal activities to enjoy. End 2023 on a high note with the best [ice skating rinks](#), [holiday markets](#), [Christmas tree displays](#), and more. Scroll through to get inspired for your best December yet!

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Courtesy of Candlelight Concerts

The extremely popular concert series known simply as **Candlelight** is turning heads right now in San Francisco! You'll enjoy works from Beethoven, Vivaldi and more played by a talented string quartet, in an intimate environment surrounded by hundreds of luminous candles. Below are some holiday experiences we're especially excited about, but a [Candlelight gift card](#) also makes for a great present if you're unsure what to choose.

- Dec. 16 – [Candlelight: Holiday Special at IAMA](#)
- Dec. 21-22 – [Candlelight: Holiday Special at St. Ignatius Church](#)

2. Catch these SF [holiday tree lightings and displays](#)

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Photo by [@415urbanadventures](#) on Instagram

December brings so many magnificent Christmas trees to San Francisco, it's ha

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season ends! Whether you're totally feeling the Christmas spirit or you could just use some holiday cheer, these **San Francisco holiday tree displays** are worth seeking out.

- **Pier 39**
- **Uncle John's Tree** ([GG Park tree lighting details here](#))
- **Thrive City**
- [And more](#)

3. December events at [Union Square Ice Rink](#)



Photo by [Union Square Ice Rink](#) on Facebook

Who's stoked to get back on the ice? Layer up and break out your favorite wintery garb, because the Union Square Ice Rink is the place to be during SF's holiday season. Union Square Ice Rink will be open for skaters of all ages and abilities **through January 15, 2024**. Here are some special events to keep in mind:

- **Dec. 7** – Drag Queens On Ice
- **Dec. 8** – Flashback Fridays
- **Dec. 14** – Silent Skate Party
- **Select Saturdays and Sundays** – Learn to Skate

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Courtesy of Grace Cathedral

Grace Cathedral is one of the most iconic churches in San Francisco, famous for its gorgeous stained glass windows, mosaics, floor labyrinths, and overall French Gothic design. It's a beautiful place to attend for any church service, but at Christmastime it is especially spectacular. Watch their event calendar for upcoming tree lightings, concerts, art installations, and more.

5. [Let's Glow SF](#) holiday projection mapping display

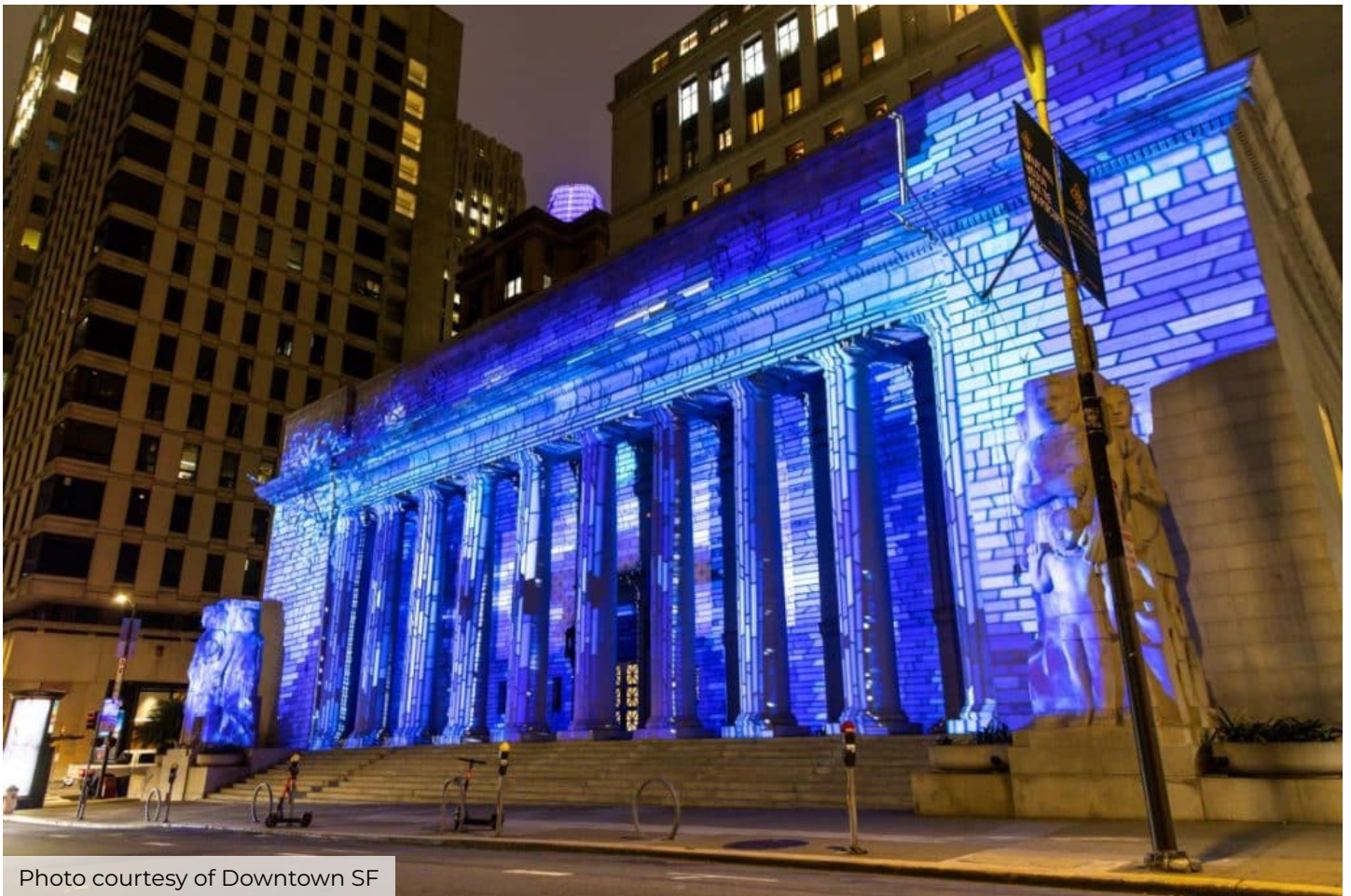


Photo courtesy of Downtown SF

Dec. 1-10, 2023

Downtown SF is once again pulling out all the stops with *Let's Glow SF*, the **largest holiday projection mapping display in the United States**. The displays will be up in the Financial District and easily viewed via a self-guided walking tour from 5-10pm each night.

Each building's façade will be brilliantly illuminated with a **dynamic light show** designed specifically for that location. The Financial District is totally transformed with eleven 4K 32,000-lumen projectors and two 4K 22,000-lumen laser projectors.

6. Santa visits and concerts at [Ghirardelli Square](#)

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Photo by [Ghirardelli Square](#) on Facebook

One of the coziest escapes in the city is Ghirardelli Square, which is a must for shoppers on any day of the year, but turns up the charm during the holidays. This December get ready for special events at the square including a **Peppermint Bark Day on Dec. 1**, a **menorah lighting on Dec. 10**, and Santa visits throughout the month.

7. Embark on the most unique [picnic experiences](#) in the Bay Area

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Mystery Picnics by AmazingCo

AmazingCo plans the most unique picnics where you'll solve clues, pick up **artisanal treats**, discover hidden **neighborhood gems** along the way, and finally make it to your destination for a **dreamy picnic experience**. Whether you're with a group of friends, your family, or a significant other, it's definitely not your ordinary picnic.

- [Haight-Ashbury/The Mission in San Francisco](#)
- [Sausalito](#)
- [Half Moon Bay](#)
- [Napa](#)

8. Explore the Bay's best ongoing [holiday light displays](#)

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Photo by Robb Most for InMenlo.com, courtesy of Filoli

Bay Area light displays are on another level when it comes to their creativity, charm, and photo potential. You'd better start planning if you want to see them all before the season's over!

- [Christmas in the Park in San Jose](#) – Nov. 29-Jan. 1 – Spend a day at San Jose's glittering winter wonderland or take a ride through the drive-through.
- [Garden of D'Lights in Walnut Creek](#) – Nov. 24-Jan. 6 – This gorgeous garden in Walnut Creek will be decked out with lights, lasers, and special effects.
- [Holidays at Filoli in Woodside](#) – Nov. 18-Jan. 7 – One of the Bay Area's most beautiful and lesser-known light displays, taking place at Filoli Estate & Gardens in Woodside.
- [GLOW: Discover the Art of Light at the Exploratorium](#) – Nov. 16-Jan. 28 – SF's Exploratorium has brought back its popular exhibition of light art.
- [Glowfari at Oakland Zoo](#) – Now through Jan. 28 – A mile-long display of hand-painted animal lanterns is up at Oakland Zoo.
- [Discover more light displays in the Bay Area.](#)

9. Plan your month with our ultimate [Bay Area holiday guide](#)

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Photo via [Christmas in the Park](#)

San Francisco draws endless crowds at during the holidays, and it's no wonder why — from the **Union Square ice rink** to the **Fairmont's two-story gingerbread house**, there's enough holiday spirit in the air to cheer up even the grumpiest Scrooge. For those who seek some inspiration to start planning around Christmas time, we've made a list and checked it twice. Read on for **your ultimate guide to the holidays in the San Francisco Bay Area**.

10. [Winter Wonderland](#) at Thrive City



Courtesy of Thrive City

Thrive City's 2023 **Winter Wonderland** is going to be a hit all month long. In addition to its [brand-new synthetic ice rink](#), here are some events to keep in mind there.

- **Nov. 29 – Tree Lighting Ceremony** – Thrive City's third annual tree lighting ceremony will celebrate the Bay Area's tallest holiday tree which towers 90 feet into the air. The two-hour celebration features holiday food and drink, live music from Darryl McDaniels, performers from the Warriors Dance Team, holiday choirs, and more.
- **Dec. 7 – Hanukkah Celebration** – Celebrate the Festival of Lights with a menorah lighting ceremony, live entertainment, festive arts and crafts, and Jewish treats.
- **Dec. 31 – Kwanzaa and Noon Year's Eve Celebration** – Celebrate Kwanzaa and ring in 2024 with a daytime concert featuring Soji Sai Afrobeat.

11. Pick up the perfect holiday gift for your loved ones

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By Secret SF/ Dana Flynn

San Francisco is full of independently owned shops and boutiques where you can find the perfect items for friends, family, and a little retail therapy for yourself. Instead of heading straight to the mall, take a scroll through our lists of shopping neighborhoods and unique shops.

- [7 SF streets that are perfect for shopping](#)
- [Unique local gift shops in SF](#)

12. [Giant menorah lightings](#) at Union Square

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Photo via Bill Graham Menorah Project

Dec. 7-15, 2023

The **Bill Graham Menorah Project** is gearing up for its **48th annual giant menorah lighting** and display! A 25-foot menorah will glow over Union Square every night of Hanukkah.

On Saturday, Dec. 10, you can enjoy fun activities, food, music and more for **“Bill Graham Menorah Day.”** Enjoy a variety of kids’ crafts, shows, and performances.

13. Fairmont Hotel’s 2-story gingerbread house

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Via [Fairmont San Francisco](#)

One of San Francisco's most celebrated holiday installations is the **two-story gingerbread house** at the Fairmont Hotel. The fascinating creation is 22 feet tall, composed of thousands of gingerbread bricks and gallons of royal icing.

14. Bay Area [winter wonderland](#) escapes

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Photo by Kirk McCoy. Courtesy of Meritage Resort & Spa

If you're looking for an even more **immersive holiday experience** in the Bay, these winter wonderland escapes will make your heart grow three sizes (no roast beast required).

[Merry Meritage](#)

Nov. 17-Jan. 7 – The beautiful **Meritage Resort & Spa** in Napa is hosting an absolutely spectacular winter village throughout the holiday season. Merry Meritage is a gorgeous sparkling winter escape in wine country, complete with an ice rink, fire pits and s'mores, VIP igloos, Santa story time, and much more.

[Après Village](#)

Nov. 17-Jan. 28 – The **Four Seasons in Palo Alto** has created a gorgeous pop-up winter wonderland called Après Village, which is the ultimate holiday escape. Whether you're looking for awesome photo ops, a festive party, amazing food, or fireside movies, this is definitely worth putting on your list!

[Explore more cozy winter escapes in the Bay Area.](#)

15. Enjoy a festive [holiday concert](#)

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San Francisco Ballet taking their bows on opening night of Tommaso's Nutcracker, 2021 // © Nikki Ritcher Photography

San Francisco is the place to be for holiday-themed concerts, performances, and shows. Read on for our favorite performances coming up this winter, ranging from jaw-dropping orchestral numbers to kid-friendly daytime shows.

16. Here's when all the [Lake Tahoe ski resorts](#) open

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Lake Tahoe is always a popular spot for Bay Area residents to ski and snowboard. It has the **highest concentration** of ski resorts in the U.S. in a **100-mile radius**. Most of the resorts open between Dec. 1-15 — head to our article for the full list of projected openings.

Read our [Lake Tahoe guide](#) for more pointers including our favorite restaurants, bars, and destinations.

17. See the jaw-dropping 2023 rendition of [Entwined](#) in Golden Gate Park

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Courtesy of SF Parks Alliance, Photo by William Tracy

Charles Gaden's *Entwined*, a sprawling immersive LED light installation in Golden Gate Park's Peacock Meadow, has been delighting San Franciscans since it first opened in 2020. This year, the art installation is returning better than ever with a new iteration of the beloved installation. *Entwined: Elder Mother* centers around the Elder Mother tree. Standing at **30 feet tall** and casting a **25-foot canopy of light** that welcomes people to sit and enjoy its glow.

18. Celebrate [SantaCon 2023](#)

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Grab your red coat and reindeer because SantaCon 2023 will return to SF **on Saturday, December 9th, starting at 12:00 pm**. Celebrating its 28th year, SantaCon is hosted in **70+ cities** around the world, with the vast majority of them taking place around the US.

19. [Holiday markets](#) around the Bay Area

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Photo by [Ground Picture](#) on Shutterstock

Holiday spirit is already in the air and the crafters of San Francisco are working at full throttle to sell their wares! We've gone ahead and rounded up some of the best **holiday markets, craft fairs, and more in the San Francisco Bay Area** for December 2023. Think Bay Area **Christmas markets** with homemade pastries, decorations, and innovative products. Or **holiday craft fairs** with all the handmade jewelry, pottery, and art you could wish for.

20. Holiday train rides

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[Napa Valley Wine Train](#)

The all-new Santa Train Jolly Journeys offer splendid views of wine country accompanied by gourmet meals, holiday cookies, Santa visits, and more.

[Roaring Camp](#)

The Roaring Camp steam trains will once again jingle through Santa Cruz and Bear Mountain with hot cocoa, decorations, and Santa visits.

21. [Holiday pop up bars](#) to discover in SF

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Photo by Lucas Bierbower, courtesy of The Vault Garden

The holidays have arrived in San Francisco and these seasonal pop-ups will be serving up Christmas cheer all winter long. **Holiday pop-up bars in San Francisco** capture the joy, nostalgia, and celebratory atmosphere of the season, plus lots of tasty cocktails. Don your most festive attire, round up your friends, and belt out Mariah Carey to your heart's desire.

22. December [free admission days](#) in SF

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Legion of Honor in Lincoln Park. Photograph by Steve Whittaker, @FAMSF. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

We love San Francisco for its vibrant culture, history, and resources, but it's no secret that living here costs a pretty penny. Whether you're a college student on a budget, or a bargain hunter wanting to see the sights, this list will certainly help you get started.

23. Coolest December [museum exhibitions](#) in SF

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As we enter a new month in San Francisco, many local museums are refreshing and replacing their temporary exhibitions. Now's a great time to take stock and plan ahead to see some of these wonderful displays before they're gone.

24. [After Dark](#) at the Exploratorium

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© Exploratorium, www.exploratorium.edu

The Exploratorium's 18+ After Dark events are a must for some epic kid-free fun at their exhibits. After Dark happens each Thursday from 6-10pm with a different theme every week, featuring guest speakers, films, great music, and more.

25. [Fort Mason Center](#)'s holiday tree lot and more December events

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Photo courtesy of The Guardsmen Tree Lot

When's the last time you paid a visit to San Francisco's amazing Fort Mason Center? The popular art center hosts numerous exhibitions and events throughout the year, and there are some special ones coming up. Look for the [Guardsmen Tree Lot](#), open through Dec. 15 (use promo code SECRETSF-23 for 10% off event tickets at checkout!) and **West Coast Craft Holiday** on Dec. 2 and 16.

26. Look for [monarch butterflies](#) fluttering along the California coast

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Photo by [Noradoa](#) via Shutterstock

The monarchs are back! At many places along the California coast, **monarch sanctuaries** are starting to see thousands of butterflies congregating together at **overwintering sites** due to the fact that they can't fly well at temperatures below 55 degrees. If you're hoping to catch a glimpse of this fascinating phenomenon, consider visiting these monarch butterfly hotspots.

27. December events at the [Ferry Building](#)

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Photo by [@ferrybuilding](#) on Instagram

San Francisco's Ferry Building is one of the city's most iconic buildings, serving as

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and countless excellent merchants who sell their wares daily in the building's many stalls. Look for the **Creativity Explored Holiday pop-up** on Saturdays and the **Ferry Building Holiday Open House** on Dec. 6.

28. Scroll through our [Bay Area concert guide](#) for December



We're lucky to experience some highly-anticipated **Bay Area concerts** this month, from Depeche Mode and Stevie Nicks at Chase Center; to The Roots at Fox Theater; to Enrique Iglesias, Pitbull, and Ricky Martin at the Shark Tank. With a wealth of historic music venues in and around San Francisco you can count on creating some memories no matter who's playing. Read on for a list of our favorite local venues for Bay Area concerts along with upcoming 2023 dates.

29. Cheer on your home teams at these December [major league sports games](#)

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Photo by Jason O'Rear via Chase Center

Warriors basketball season is in full swing at Chase Center and Levi's Stadium is hosting some thrilling 49ers games. Down in San Jose, hockey season is here for the Sharks. Read on for a breakdown of our home teams in the SF Bay Area, plus details about where to see them play this month.

30. Pay a visit to [Salesforce Park](#) over the holidays

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@transitcentersf on Instagram

San Francisco's **Salesforce Park** is an amazing modern marvel in the Financial District

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8-10, where guests can watch the park come to life with thousands of holiday lights and enjoy festive activities including performances, music, and crafts.

31. Warm up around these [cozy fireplaces](#)



Courtesy of SPARK Social SF

A homey, roaring fire is a hot commodity during winter (and basically any other season) in SF's characteristic foggy weather. We've rounded up some of our favorite fireplaces in San Francisco, ranging from outdoor patios to neighborhood bars to fine dining restaurants.

- [25 Lusk](#)
- [Zeki's Bar](#)
- [SPARK Social SF](#)
- [Foreign Cinema](#)
- [And more](#)

32. Enjoy a delightful [snow day](#)

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San Francisco is a magical, beautiful, exciting place, with one caveat – there’s never any snow. Lucky for us, California is home to dozens of different climates and it’s not so difficult to pack up the car for a drive out to the snowy mountains in the distance.

- [Pinecrest](#)
- [Dodge Ridge](#)
- [Arnold](#)
- [Yosemite](#)
- [And more](#)

33. Start looking ahead and save the dates for these [2024 events](#)

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Outside Lands Twin Peaks stage. Photo courtesy of Outside Lands

A new year has started and we can't wait to see what it has in store for San Francisco. Here we've rounded up some of the best **exhibitions, events, festivals, parades, and concerts coming up in 2024**. For events with no date yet announced, we've put the month they usually occur in so you can be on the lookout. Grab your calendar and jot down your favorites!

34. Sip your way through the best [hot chocolate](#) in the city

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@recchiuticonfections via Instagram

You don't have to be a kid to know that hot chocolate is one of the most underrated drinks on any cafe's menu. As we head into the fall and winter seasons, it's a great time to compile some spots to visit next time you're craving this delicious drink!

- [Dandelion Chocolate](#)
- [Ghirardelli Ice Cream & Chocolate Shop](#)
- [La Oaxaqueña](#)
- [And more](#)

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Photo by [@marufukuramenofficial](#) on Instagram

A steaming bowl of ramen is perhaps the most comforting and filling food we can

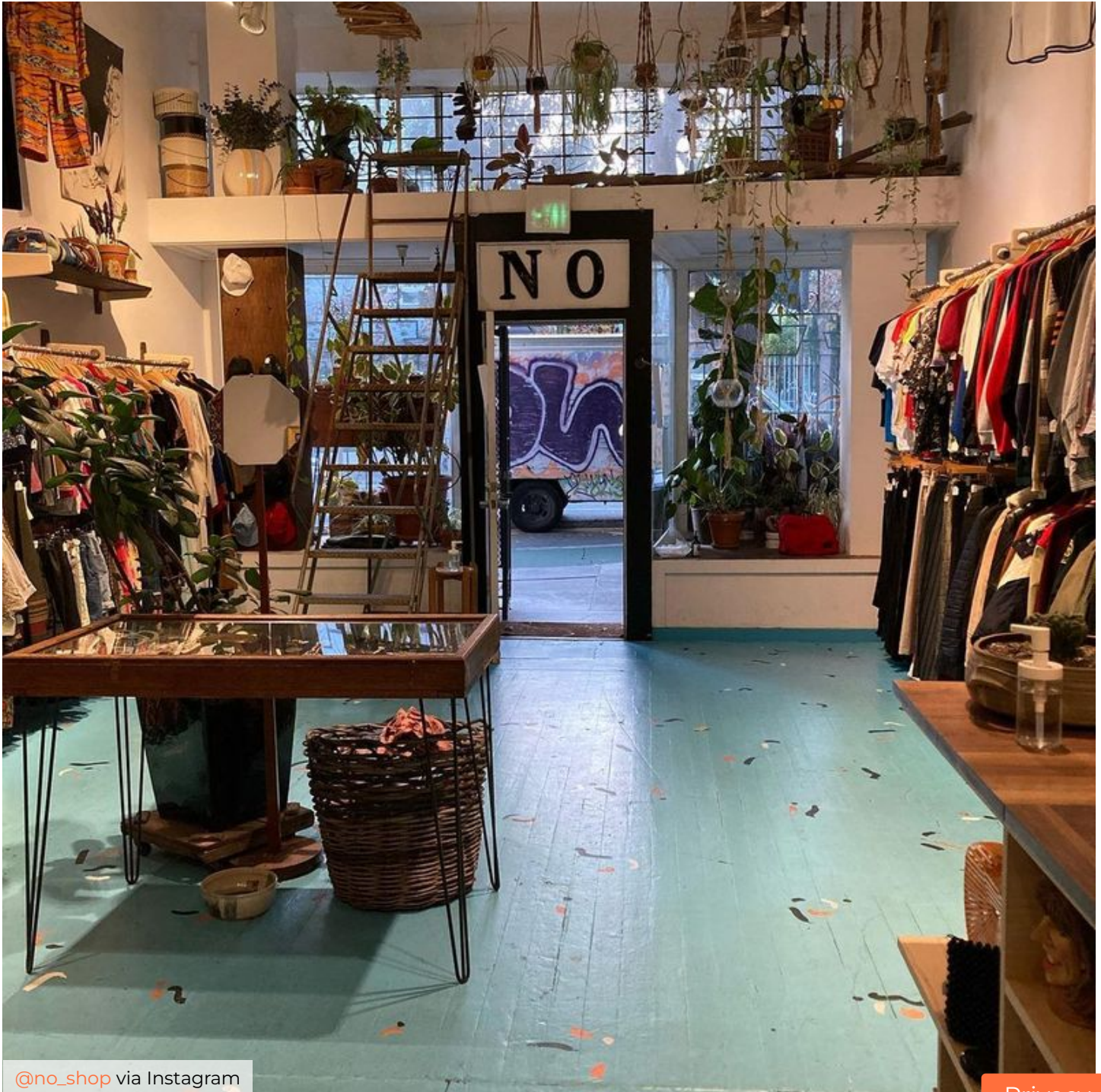
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places to enjoy this amazing dish.

- [Marufuku](#)
- [Mensho Tokyo SF](#)
- [Hinodeya](#)
- [And more](#)

36. Go thrifting at a [vintage shop](#)



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in your best '20s flapper dress, San Francisco has a vintage clothing store for that.

- [No Shop](#)
- [ReLove](#)
- [Held Over](#)
- [And more](#)

37. Enjoy some delicious seasonal goods from a [local bakery](#).



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Who's hungry? San Franciscans with a sweet tooth have it easy in this glorious city, because SF bakeries absolutely do not mess around. We wanted to get to the bottom of where San Franciscans get their baked goods, so we posted an Instagram poll asking for recommendations and got some great ones.

- [B. Patisserie](#)
- [Arizmendi](#)
- [Neighbor Bakehouse](#)
- [And more](#)

38. Enjoy seasonal treats from SF's best [Jewish restaurants and bakeries](#)



Courtesy of Loquat. Photo by Mohammad Gorjestani

Famously delicious and nourishing, “Jewish food” can refer to a variety of dishes found across the Jewish diaspora. Some but not all of the restaurants on this list are kosher, and you’ll find culinary traditions that range from Tel Aviv to New York City and beyond. It’s a good place to start for anyone looking to explore and enjoy Jewish food traditions here in SF.

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- [Wise Sons Jewish Delicatessen](#)
- [And more](#)

39. Make the most of your visit to [Union Square](#)

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Photo by [@doitwithwilly](#) on Instagram

San Francisco's Union Square is ground zero for Christmas and holiday experie

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Bill Graham Menorah, the 83-foot Macy's Tree, the popular Safeway Holiday Ice Rink, the Miracle at PCH pop-up bar, and the Winter Walk (back by popular demand!). If you're planning a visit Downtown SF this year and don't know where to start, read on for the ultimate guide to **Union Square holiday events and attractions**.

40. Take an unforgettable [day trip](#) from SF



Photo by [Lux Blue](#) on Shutterstock

We love San Francisco for its countless activities to enjoy everywhere you go. But anytime there's a long weekend or a free day, we're quite well-located to check out some neighboring California gems. Be sure to put these day trips on your to-do list for the next time you want to get out of the city for a well-earned mini vacation.

- [Pinnacles National Park](#)
- [Wilder Ranch](#)
- [Carmel-By-The-Sea](#)
- [Capitola](#)
- [And more](#)

See also: [10 best SF gift experiences to give this holiday season](#)

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