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# Sip & See

Enjoy California weather with a side of wine at these outdoor winery venues

BY TAYLOR SMITH

California remains a popular destination for a plethora of reasons, including its commitment to sustainability, world-class meeting facilities and luxury hotels. But two things make the Golden State shine just a little brighter: its breathtaking natural beauty and, of course, its world-class wine.



CUVAISON, NAPA VALLEY

MICHAEL CLIFFE FOR VISIT NAPA VALLEY



Tap into the following wineries in Monterey County, Napa Valley and Sonoma County so attendees can enjoy an outdoor setting while sipping something sweet in California.

### Monterey County

From Pinnacles National Park to the Big Sur coastline, Monterey County's natural beauty is hard to deny. The bucket-list destination is known far and wide for its views, and groups are invited to take them in through a variety of outdoor venues.

What makes Monterey County even more enticing—especially for wine enthusiasts—is the area's collection of more than 175 vineyards, over 60 wineries and tasting rooms and 32 varietals all within the destination's borders. Many of them offer private settings for larger gatherings.

Rustique Wines, a family-owned and -operated estate, was established in 2006 in the heart of Monterey County and at the foothills of the Santa Lucia Mountain Range. The winery offers a rustic and unpretentious charm alongside rolling hills and vineyards, with flavors and vibes reminiscent of California wine of the 1970s. The estate makes pinot noir and chardonnay with the grapes from Silacci Vineyards and offers an original barn for laid-back gatherings of 50-300 guests.

Originally founded in 1982 by Bob and Patti Brower as Chateau Julien Wine Estate, Folktale Winery & Vineyards became what it is today in 2015 after being acquired by a local winemaker named Gregory Ahn. Ahn renamed the 15 acres of landscaped gardens and vineyards to reflect the thrill of discovery, the joy of gathering "and the idea that every great bottle of wine holds a story."

The idyllic winery situated along the Carmel River is just five minutes from Carmel-by-the-Sea, a small beach destination on the Monterey Peninsula, and offers multiple indoor and outdoor venues. The Rose Vineyard, perfect for gatherings beneath the sun or stars on a grassy area, is surrounded by grapevines and boasts views of the Santa Lucia Mountains. Folktale Winery & Vineyards can accommodate groups from 30 to 1,000 guests.

Dating back to 1928, Holman Ranch sits atop a 750-acre private estate in Carmel



RUSTIQUE WINES

RUSTIQUE WINES, MONTEREY COUNTY

Valley and was once a Hollywood retreat for stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Marlon Brando, Theda Bara and Clark Gable. The winery and ranch has welcomed Indigenous tribes, Spanish missionaries, cattle farmers, winemakers and Hollywood stars for nearly a century, and now groups are invited to experience Holman Ranch privately, as it only hosts one event at a time, allowing for exclusive access to the historic hacienda, lawn and guest rooms.

Holman Ranch's state-of-the-art wine cave provides unique tasting experiences and a venue for cocktail hours and seated dinners. The Rose Patio greets guests with a grand entrance gate while the Main Plaza situates guests in the heart of the venue and near a paved area ideal for games like bocce ball and cornhole. Holman Ranch can host groups of 10-300 guests.

### Napa Valley

Offering more than 400 wineries open for tastings and nearly 100 urban tasting rooms, Napa Valley is a top-tier destination for world-class wine and the great outdoors. Plus, 95% of Napa Valley's wineries are family-owned and -operated, according to Visit Napa Valley, giving groups the opportunity to give back.

One such family-owned winery is Cuvaison, which was founded in 1969 as one of

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# VISIT Oakland



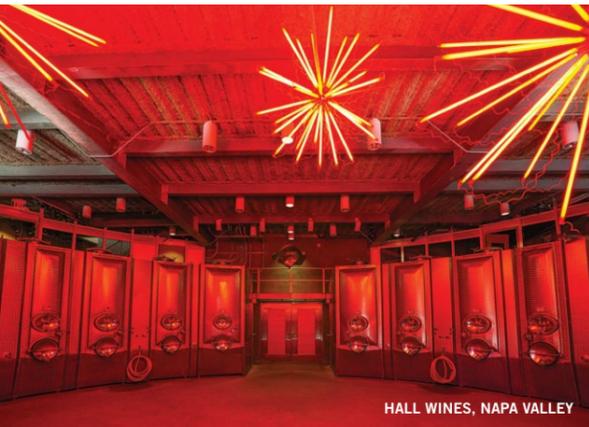
the “pioneering wineries that helped shape the modern era of Napa Valley winemaking,” according to the winery’s website.

Cuvaision features multiple indoor and outdoor spaces for groups of up to 125 overlooking the vineyards, hills and a duck pond, as well as private experiences for groups of 1-10 and 10-20 people, all including a tasting of five wines for each guest led by one of the winery’s Hospitality Specialists. Groups of up to 50 guests can combine the Winemaker’s Lounge & Patio, and full buyouts are available for larger gatherings of up to 125 guests.

Nestled in the heart of Napa Valley on the location of the historic St. Helena Bergfeld Winery is Hall Wines, a prestigious winery that elevates the region’s rich winemaking history and commits to sustainable and environmentally responsible practices.

The Hall family completed restoration of the 1885 Bergfeld Winery in 2013, becoming California’s first LEED Gold-certified winery. Groups can take advantage of event spaces that include:

- **Library + Mayacama/Vaca Salons**, with views of the historic winery and mountain ranges for up to 14 people



HALL WINES, NAPA VALLEY

MICHAEL CUFFE FOR VISIT NAPA VALLEY

- **Founder’s Cellar**, offering a sophisticated space that seats groups at the King’s Table, crafted to look like one solid log
- **The Great Lawn**, the focal point of the property and ideal for grand experiences during any time of the day

Napa Valley’s Beringer is California’s longest continually operating winery, serving as one of the first gravity-led facilities operating using hand-dug caves and cellars and giving public tours since 1934. The estate provides a unique opportunity to experience Napa Valley’s past, with the Rhine House mansion built in the style of a 17th-century European chateau serving as a focal point for the winery.



BACCHUS LANDING, SONOMA COUNTY

Beringer’s stately 19th-century architecture and verdant gardens have been designated a Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places, and groups have the opportunity to experience many of the historic buildings.

The 17-room Rhine House features a stonework exterior with stained-glass windows and interior wood paneling while the Hudson House, original to the Beringer property, boasts high ceilings, French doors, a wood-burning fireplace and a wraparound porch. The Grove just outside the Hudson House surrounds guests in 100-year-old Redwood trees, and the Wine Caves serve as an ideal space for pre-dinner receptions or daytime winery tours.

### Sonoma County

Just 30 miles north of San Francisco sits another acclaimed California wine region, Sonoma County, with a list of more than 425 wineries situated amongst nearly 60,000 acres of vineyards within the borders of 19 American Viticultural Areas to choose from, according to Sonoma County Tourism.

In 1960, Walter Byck proposed to his family in the Netherlands that they start an art garden. By 1978, Byck proclaimed he “found paradise” on 155 acres of land overlooking the Russian River Valley, and his venture eventually turned into one of the renowned Russian River Valley wineries of Sonoma County, Paradise Ridge Winery, offering award-winning vineyard-designated wines and sunset views overlooking Santa Rosa in the heart of Sonoma County.

Paradise Ridge Winery offers a naturally sophisticated setting and space for up to 250 guests indoors and out, including two company event venues: The Vine Room, a contemporary indoor space with views of the Russian River Valley, and Nagasawa Tasting Room, named in honor of Kanaye Nagasawa, samurai of Kagoshima and a

pioneering winemaker of Paradise Ridge and Sonoma County. The winery’s Veranda, facing west, provides backdrops of California sunsets while the Poetry Terrace is the venue’s most popular outdoor location and features a bandstand and views of the estate.

Sitting in the heart of Healdsburg along Westside Road are a number of Spanish Mediterranean-style buildings making up the piazza at Bacchus Landing, a curated collective of world-class wineries rooted in Sonoma County. Offering five tasting rooms and wine paired with local artisanal bites, Bacchus Landing provides a picture-perfect setting for enjoying California wine with a view.

With more than 25,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor space, groups of all sizes are invited to gather at Bacchus Landing for a meeting, workshop, reception, sit-down dinner and more. The property’s 1,015-square-foot Vintners Room can hold up to 80 guests while the second-floor Rooftop Terrace can accommodate 120.

Founded in 1990 by Sam and Vicki Sebastiani, Viansa Winery combines the roots of both Tuscany and the Sonoma Valley in an environment dedicated to Italian varietal wines and hospitality. The winery, set atop a hill overlooking the Valley of the Moon, resembles a Tuscan Villa with a tiled roof, terracotta walls and shuttered windows. French doors open to a circular courtyard surrounded by olive trees and grapevines, and a stone-walled staircases leads to a bronze door opening to an enchanting hilltop “village” with a fountain courtyard, ivy-clad walls and a picnic area beneath a grapevine-laced trellis.

Host events at Viansa venues like the circular courtyard, a candlelit wine cellar or the winery’s newest reception space, the Pavilion, available year-round and offering panoramic views of the Sonoma Valley, estate vineyards and coastal wetlands.

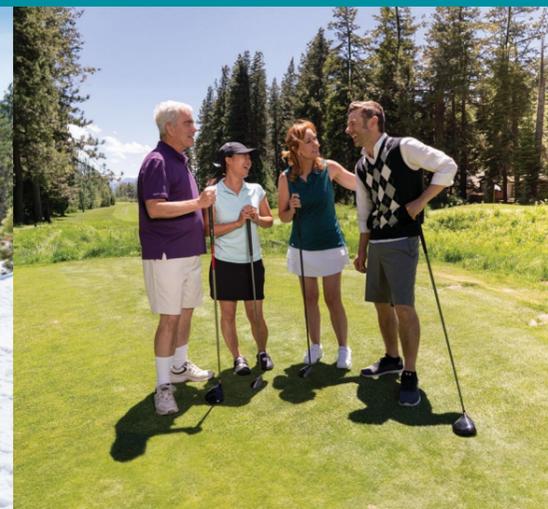
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MOSCONE CENTER, SAN FRANCISCO

# GREEN YOUR MEETING

BY DANIELLE LEBRECK

50M © TIM GRIFFITH

These California convention centers can help you achieve your event sustainability goals



**S**ustainability has been undoubtedly one of the hottest topics of discussion in the global meetings industry in 2023.

The U.S. is often perceived as lagging in its sustainability efforts, but the same cannot be said for California, which has long stood out as a leader on eco-friendly initiatives. The state is home to eight LEED-certified convention centers—the most of any state in the country—and is helping meeting organizers green their meetings in meaningful ways.

“California has been on the forefront of establishing LEED-certified venues,” said Sherida Sessa, group director, Buildings & Construction Group at Informa Connect, which puts on Greenbuild International Conference + Expo, the world’s largest green building conference and expo. Greenbuild brought its event to both San Diego Convention Center and Moscone Center in San Francisco in 2021 and 2022 (see sidebar). “When we go to book Greenbuild venues for

future years, we start with certified facilities because it gives us the confidence that the team within the convention center is prepared for the practices that our audience expects us to adhere to for the duration of the event. It is also helpful because certified venues have the capabilities and procedures in place to give us a full report of the environmental impact of the event.

“We typically book Greenbuild many years in advance, so it’s important that each venue we select has a lasting commitment to sustainability and is committed to continuous improvement,” she added.

Commitment to sustainability is a prominent pillar at many California convention centers, as Greenbuild has found, along with many others. Here are a few that you can tap for your next green event in The Golden State.

### Moscone Center, San Francisco

Moscone Center is a shining example of sustainability for a number of reasons. The facility has the lowest carbon footprint per delegate of any major convention center in North America and is the highest-scoring LEED Platinum convention center in the world following its expansion in 2018. A rooftop solar panel provides the center with ap-

proximately 19% of its power, and a greywater treatment system recovers 15 million gallons of water annually for reuse in landscaping, street cleaning and toilet flushing.

“More meetings and event organizers are enquiring about our sustainability initiatives,” noted Lori Lincoln, VP of global PR and communications for SF Travel. “We’re fortunate that Moscone Center is in the heart of one of the greenest cities in the world, located by world-class hotels and attractions and connected to San Francisco’s robust public transit system. And sustainability is factored into every part of Moscone’s operations, from how the buildings are designed to the food and beverage options to how we keep the facilities clean.”

### San Diego Convention Center

San Diego Convention Center (SDCC) has made many strides in recent years to make meetings and events more eco-friendly. The facility upped its renewable energy use from 31% to 50%. Its kitchens also make an effort to source locally within a 150-mile radius and participate in local composting programs.

SDCC’s location also plays a large role in its sustainability efforts, almost ensuring that an event that selects the center will

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lower its carbon emissions. SDCC is located in the heart of downtown and is walkable to many hotels, restaurants and other attractions—in fact, *The Wall Street Journal* ranked it No. 5 for walkability out of all convention centers in the U.S. It's also just three miles from the airport, is near a San Diego Trolley stop and is less than a mile from the Santa Fe Depot where attendees can connect to North San Diego, L.A. and more.

The City of San Diego itself has aggressive sustainability goals: The city's Climate Action Plan has set a target of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2035.

### Los Angeles Convention Center

What makes the LEED Gold-certified Los Angeles Convention Center (LACC) unique

is it's a public-private facility, which means it's closely aligned with the City of Los Angeles' sustainability goals. The sunny locale is also home to the largest solar array on a municipally owned convention center in the U.S. at 2.21 megawatts. The LACC also has a "cool roof" and light-defusing windows to reflect sunlight and heat away from the building to save energy.

When it comes to F&B consumption, there are a number of green highlights. Single-use plastics were officially banned throughout the facility in April 2022 and replaced with aluminum bottles throughout cafes and catering operations. A 9,500-square-foot rooftop garden with produce enhances the center's food service program of 90% locally sourced food. The facility has a consistent waste diversion rate of 70% or higher, even reaching 90% in 2016 when the U.S. Green Building Council Annual came to town.

### SAFE Credit Union Convention Center, Sacramento

Fresh off of an expansion, the LEED Silver-certified SAFE Credit Union Convention Center is hearing increased interest in eco-friendly meetings from clients.

"The team is finding that meeting planners that are looking to bring their meetings

to Sacramento are asking, 'What green initiatives and sustainable initiatives do you have?'" said Matt Voreyer, general manager for the convention center, SAFE Credit Union Performing Arts Center and Memorial Auditorium. "So, from a potential convention standpoint, that's a very hot topic.

"It's not only what convention groups are asking, but we attend a lot of industry events and we are seeing there's more of a push for green sustainability, and as you get the younger generation involved, they are more eco-friendly than others. You've got to do it in order to get the business," he added.

Mark Quartarolo, director of facilities for the complex, can walk planners through all of the ways the convention center is working toward its sustainability goals, from water and energy reduction strategies to waste management and recycling.

Sacramento is widely known as the "Farm-to-Fork" capital, so sustainable F&B sourcing and waste diversion are key components of the convention center's green initiatives. The facility composts food with Waste Management and partners with Centerplate to donate unused, consumable food to Works of Mercy Homeless Outreach Program. (In 2022, more than 19,000 pounds of food was shared and distributed).

## Insights From GREENBUILD

Greenbuild International Conference + Expo is the largest annual event for green building professionals worldwide, where participants learn and source cutting-edge solutions to improve resilience, sustainability and quality of life in buildings, cities and communities.

So, it's no surprise that the event is a pioneer in sustainability. It has been TRUE Zero Waste certified for several years, and in 2022 it achieved two new milestones: becoming the first event to receive Platinum Certification for Event Sustainability from the Events Industry Council (EIC); and upgrading its carbon emission calculation approach to be more inclusive of wider greenhouse gas emissions in line with leading global practices and science, which allowed Greenbuild to become CarbonNeutral® certified for the first time.

Destination selection is extremely important to achieving the sustainability goals of the expo, according to Sherida Sessa, group director, Buildings & Construction Group at Informa Connect, the parent company for Greenbuild.

"When we look at a destination, we, of course, look for facilities that can meet our event carbon neutrality and waste diversion goals; but beyond that we look at whether the destination can support the greenbuilding mission of our attendees," Sessa explained. "We want to make sure that any

city that we choose is on an upward trajectory for LEED-certified space, that there is investment in sustainability careers, that there's an active greenbuilding community and that there is greenbuilding support from the localities both in terms of code and policy. Greenbuild aims to improve each city it visits, so it is important that the host city and community align with the event goals."

In 2021, in its first year back since the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Greenbuild ventured to San Diego Convention Center, where the team was faced with a whole new set of hurdles.

"There were enhanced challenges in terms of waste as there was more emphasis on single-use items than in any other point of Greenbuild's history," Sessa said. "The San Diego Convention Center did a phenomenal job of working with us to figure out what our sustainability goals could look like with a renewed focus on ensuring the health of the occupant top-of-mind."

Sessa also noted that attendees appreciated the walkability of San Diego Convention Center to hotels and nearby attractions, a win for both attendees and the environment, eliminating the need for carbon-emitting transportation. The event also donated 1,500 pounds of organics to AB Jones and Co., which is a social venture that centers around fork-to-farm sustainability to



enhance Southern California soils.

In 2022, Greenbuild stayed in California, but this time traveled north to San Francisco at Moscone Center, where it encountered a staff that worked hard to assist the event in its sustainability goals as well.

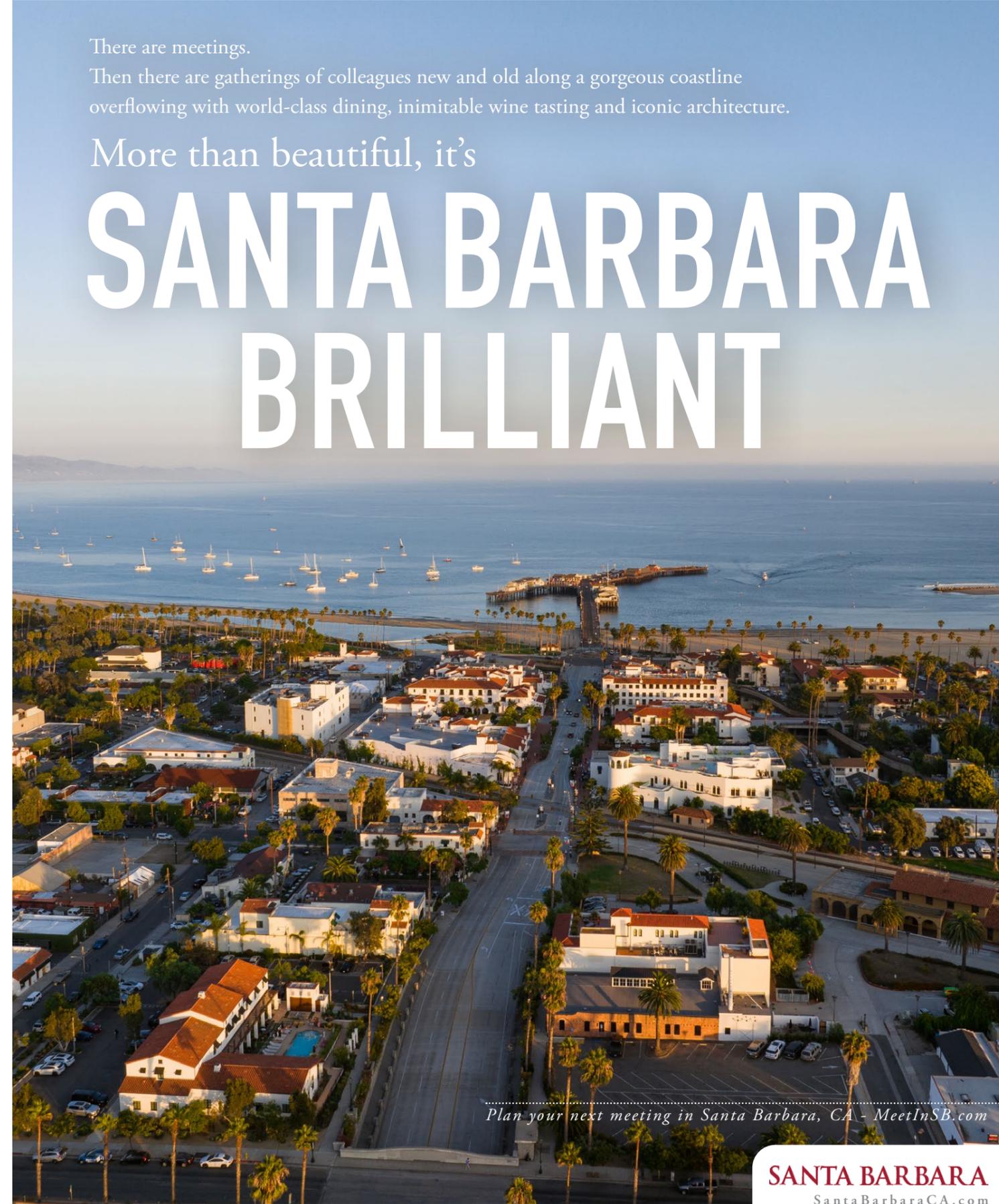
"In San Francisco we hit a new set of challenges in terms of procurement, especially for catering, as we always try to source local food, but the team worked hard to make our signature Women in Green luncheon a success with as much locally sourced food as possible," Sessa noted.

"The Metro in San Francisco was a great way for our attendees to tour local greenbuilding sites without having to use buses that drive carbon emissions," she added.

Greenbuild hopes to be a zero-waste and net-zero carbon business by 2030, and partnering with venues in San Diego and San Francisco are helping it move toward these goals.

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ACCESS TRAX, SAN DIEGO



*California excels in offering DEIA-relevant venues for events*

BY TYLER DAVIDSON

**D**iversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) is one of the most visible issues in the meetings and events industry.

The trend toward ensuring “supplier diversity”—tapping venues and services owned and operated by underrepresented communities—is where the proverbial “rubber hits the road,” in that all communities should benefit from the massive economic impact when an event comes to town.

Following are examples of supplier diversity-relevant venues that can be tapped in the Golden State.

**Access Trax, San Diego (and beyond)**

While many people may commonly associate DEIA with minority or women-owned businesses, accessibility—the “A” in DEIA—has recently become a top priority.

Properly accommodating people with disabilities at special events, and especially offsite events in outdoor locations, can be especially challenging. With Southern California’s optimal climate, an event on one of its many beaches serves up an iconic slice of SoCal life, but the experience can be

daunting for those who use a wheelchair. Meeting the challenge is Kelly Twichel, CEO and co-founder of Access Trax, a San Diego-based company that rents and sells wheelchair-accessible mat systems that can be used for outdoor events.

Access Trax was born from a college assignment to help adaptive surfers cross the sand using their wheelchairs when Twichel was a graduate student in occupational therapy. The idea really hit home to her because her mom was disabled following a massive stroke when Twichel was 12.

“As an adolescent girl, I was like, ‘Wow, I have to grow up overnight; I have to learn how to be an adult and take care of my mom,’” she said. “And I began to see how places around me weren’t accessible, and not only in a physical sense, but also in an attitudinal sense.”

Planners can rent or buy Access Trax mats for events throughout the world but the bulk of rentals occur in Southern California because the company is based in San Diego.

“There are a lot of different entities that we can serve, but the main thing that ties them all together is they have a need to serve somebody who happens to use a wheelchair or other mobility device over outdoor terrain—sand, grass, gravel, snow—all of those types of terrains are typically a barrier,” Twichel said. “Using our Access Trax—portable access mats that fold out

over the terrain in seconds—they’re able to create an accessible space in very little time and that’s very cost effective.”

Twichel said caterers and other vendors often use Access Trax mats to create a hard surface for outdoor events. One client includes a Southern California Hyatt Regency that uses the mats to create an accessible surface for guests to enjoy beach bonfires.

“You know, it’s about to be 2024 and we have the tools out there,” Twichel said about the relevance of providing accessible facilities. “I think the disconnect is there’s still more work to be done on awareness of how easy it is to actually make something accessible with just a couple of things.”

**Destination Crenshaw, Los Angeles**

A jaw-dropping new open-air art museum stretching 1.3 miles and planned to open in 2024—an expected El Niño rain deluge is delaying the installation of some pieces—will transform the southern Los Angeles neighborhood of Crenshaw, a center of the metropolis’ African American community.

“How do we preserve Crenshaw culturally using our chief export, which is our creative from our community?” asked Jason Foster, president and COO of Destination Crenshaw. “We’re designing and building this after a years-long community engagement campaign with people from the Crenshaw community.

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“The art world knows that we have a lot of very, very talented, homegrown Black artists from our community and we’ve enlisted some of these artists to do some of our first commissions,” Foster continued, “so when we open, we will have sculptures that have been approved by the city Cultural Affairs Commission from Brenna Youngblood, Melvin Edwards, Alison Saar, Charles Dickson, Maren Hassinger, Gerard Basil Stripling...”

The events-friendly expanse will be complemented by murals on local businesses as well as sculptures along the corridor. The project is also planting nearly 200 trees.

Planners can reach out to the nonprofit Destination Crenshaw to inquire about holding event activations in the corridor. Destination Crenshaw will also help by enlisting the local ecosystem of small business entrepreneurs and artists, as well as facilitating workshops and even organizing dining at local restaurants.

Foster said that the corridor will be able to host groups of up to 50, with the opportunity to partner with other Los Angeles area African American art institutions.

### Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles

Located in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo Arts District right in the heart of downtown and next to the Grand Central Market, the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) offers a historically relevant central location near the new Little Tokyo/Arts District Los Angeles Metro Rail station.

The mission of JANM is to promote understanding and appreciation of America’s ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience.

“Over at JANM we have a wonderful museum, and in addition to the museum we have some wonderful venue spaces as well,” said Coleen Uchida-Tamny, facilities rental coordinator for JANM. “Our Aratani Central Hall can be used for receptions and meetings as well as for banquets. On our campus we have a 198-seat theater as well,

and a boardroom and education rooms, and a beautiful garden for outdoor receptions. Our campus is also comprised of a plaza where we’ve held outdoor events as well.”

The maximum capacity in the



COURTESY DESTINATION CRENSHAW

DESTINATION CRENSHAW, LOS ANGELES

Central Hall is 300 (220 banquet style) and just under 200 in its theater.

According to Sherrill Ingalls, director of marketing and communications for JANM, the site is also relevant because of a painful part of Japanese-American U.S. history.

“One of the special aspects of JANM is, in addition to our location in Little Tokyo, we’re located on the site of a very historic location that adds a lot of meaning to gatherings,” Ingalls said. “Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were required to report here with

their two bags and go to internment camps around the country... and we often have events where there are conferences with API [Asian Pacific Islander] organizations...and gatherings for historic societies, museum associations. The

opening of the new metro station in Little Tokyo has also attracted many transportation meetings.”

Ingalls said JANM has a list of preferred caterers but can also leverage its partnership with nearby Japanese restaurants.

“Not only does the revenue and rental fees go to JANM, they also have the opportunity to support Little Tokyo businesses such as the restaurants and caterers we work with,” she said, adding that the venue is a frequent site for film shoots and industry events, such as using the outdoor plaza area for red carpet soirees.

### Chinese Historical Society of America, San Francisco

Set in the historically landmarked, Julia Morgan-designed Chinatown YWCA building, the Chinese Historical Society of

America (CHSA) features permanent and rotating exhibits highlighting the people, places and movements in Chinese American culture.

CHSA’s location right in the heart of Chinatown makes for a perfect offsite opportunity for groups that want to experience one of the largest Chinatowns in the world—one of the top attractions in a city full of postcard-perfect tourist draws.

According to Nathaniel Jue, communications coordinator for CHSA, a very popular current exhibit running in the venue for the foreseeable future showcases Chinatown’s most famous son, marital arts cultural and movie icon Bruce Lee.

“We just had an event in September by an apparel company called Shoe Palace that was launching a Bruce Lee-themed clothing collection and they partnered with the Bruce Lee Foundation for,” Jue said. “They had a launch party at our venue with a DJ spinning music, food and catering. If you want music and space for a DJ, that’s great. If you want a photo booth, we can accommodate that. We do have an outdoor space as well where we have movie screenings on a huge wall.”

CHSA offers three rental options: the Main Floor of the museum, which includes the We Are Bruce Lee Gallery, Courtyard and Hallway (150 standing, 25 seated); the Learning Center (50 standing, 35 seated); and the exterior Parking Lot (200 standing, 100 seated).

The CHSA Gift Shop can also be added to the rental mix.



CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA, SAN FRANCISCO



COURTESY JANM

JAPANESE AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES

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# THE RISE OF AI

California is often at the epicenter of technology innovations—and AI is no exception

BY DANIELLE LEBRECK

**T**echnology has advanced at a breakneck speed the past few decades, adding words like “computer,” “internet,” “smartphone” and “social media” to our everyday vocabulary—revolutionizing cultural and social norms. California has been at the epicenter of many of these inventions and is now the home of some of technology’s biggest names.

The new kid on the block in this string of innovations is artificial intelligence (AI), which surged to the forefront of society with the creation of ChatGPT in 2022. The San Francisco-based company OpenAI that launched the generative AI app saw its product become the fastest-growing software application in the world six months after it launched.

In turn, the meetings and events industry has been grappling with the introduction of this new technology—both evaluating its risks and great potential. Fewer places are positioned better to show event professionals the opportunity and innovation AI can bring to the industry than California.

“It’s clear that AI will be involved in virtually everything we do going forward. In our industry, it’s already being used to source recommendations, build travel itineraries and even manage bookings,” said Caroline Beteta, president and CEO of Visit California. “Like many other technologies, California has established itself as a leader in artificial intelligence, home to many of the top AI companies and research institu-

tions. Innovation is woven into California’s culture, influencing our meetings and events industry to dream bigger.”

### Innovative Examples

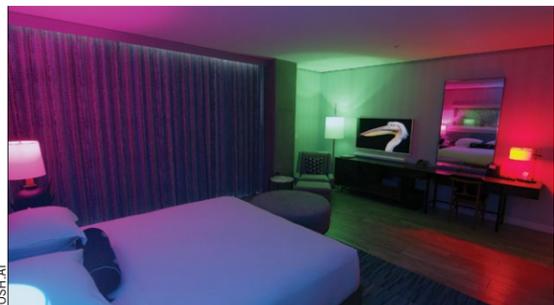
One such example of AI is at The Kimpton Rowan in Palm Springs, California, which made a splash when it announced a pilot project in November 2021. Josh.ai—a technology company, based in Denver with offices in California, that focuses on AI, machine learning and design-first hardware primarily in homes—partnered with IHG to select the property as the test location for the “smart hotel room of the future,” where it employed voice technology and AI to enhance the guest experience.

The first iteration of the pilot was born in part from the pandemic as a way to entice travelers to return to hotels by offering a touchless technology that mimicked the comforts of home. Automated lighting control (with color and tuning elements), window shades, audio and TVs could all be controlled with voice or an app. In the second iteration of the pilot in summer 2023 during the IHG Film Festival, generative AI technology was introduced with the Josh assistant.

“I can ask Josh any sort of question about local attractions near me, etc. It’s really limitless in the amount of assistance it can provide,” said Casey Levy-Tulloch, director of business development for Josh.ai.

Levy-Tulloch noted that the pilot has generated interest from more hotels and has the company thinking even bigger, kicking around solutions for smart conference centers and other facilities.

“The first pilot has led to more conversa-



KIMPTON ROWAN PALM SPRINGS “SMART HOTEL ROOM OF THE FUTURE”

tions with hotel providers from big chains to small boutique hotels,” he said. “We definitely have gotten a lot of interest in the smart conference room or huddle room. We are actively discussing and scoping those projects.”

Restaurants and bars, hospitals and other healthcare facilities and even university classrooms are on the company’s radar following the Palm Springs program.

Sojern, a San Francisco-based company that provides marketing services to hotels, destinations and attractions, is also doing innovative AI work in the hotel space. The travel marketing platform now offers an AI Smart Concierge to hotels, which lets “overburdened staff focus their time on delivering the highest levels of service, while [its] solution helps reduce front desk calls by more than 50% and increase response times by 30%.”

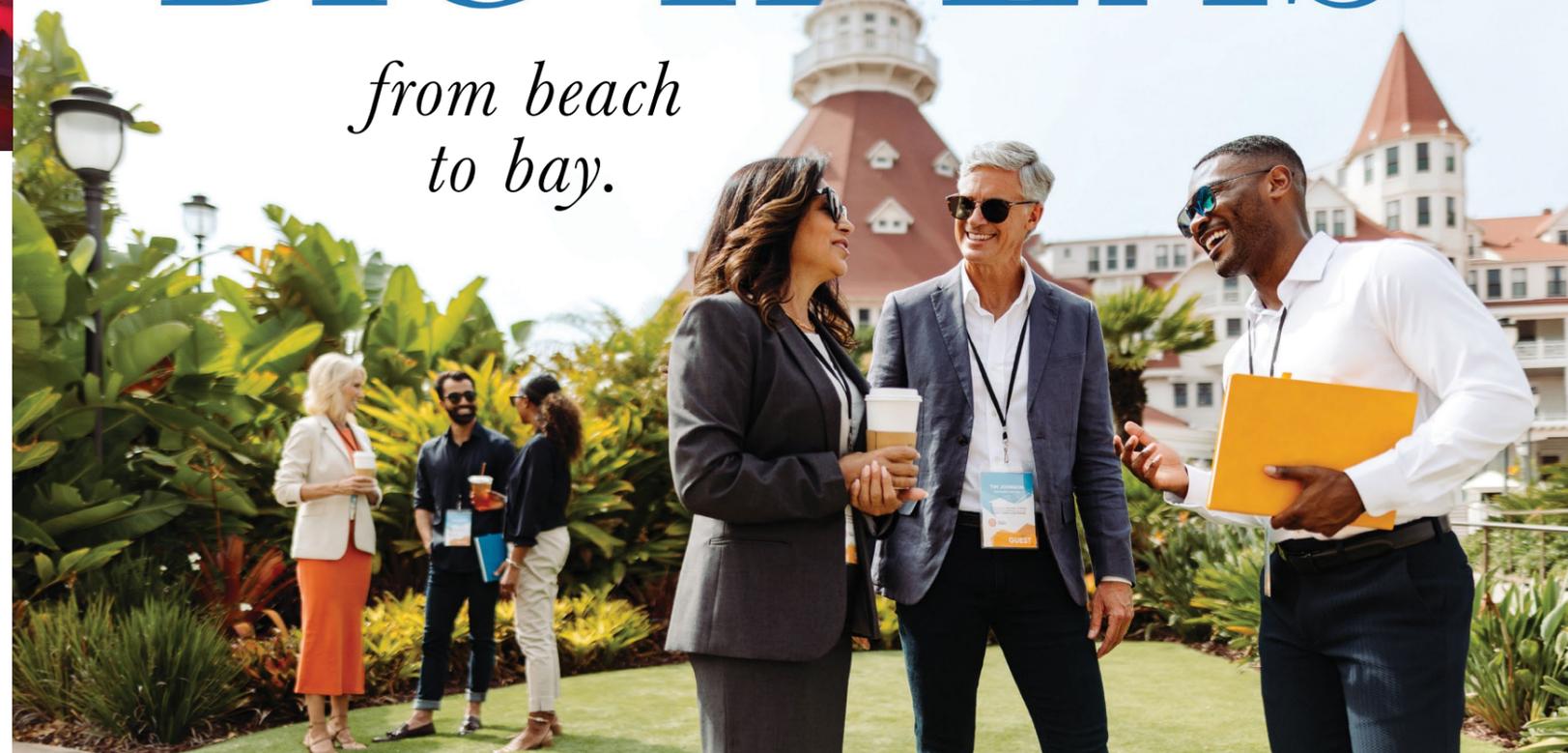
Tasks like scheduling room service, upselling nearby attraction tickets or onsite restaurants, optimizing spa sales and other available services, or contacting housekeeping or maintenance can all be performed by the Smart Concierge. For busy meeting attendees staying at hotels, this seamless, contactless experience can be a major time saver, and it also opens up hotel staff to provide more customized service to guests.

“By using [AI Concierge] throughout the guest journey, Posadas has increased ancillary revenue with more than 53K requests over the last nine months,” said Leslie Gomez, director of quality, standards and innovation for Posadas, in a testimonial on Sojern’s website. “Our guests satisfaction improved more than 19 percentage points in NPS (Net Promoter Score) from guests who had contact with our digital concierge experience.”

These custom smart solutions are just the beginning. AI is growing at a rapid rate, and how it will continue to revolutionize the events and hospitality industry is yet to be seen. Though it comes with risks and rewards, California will surely continue to lead the way on many game-changing inventions and discoveries, as is its tradition.

# BIG IDEAS

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