

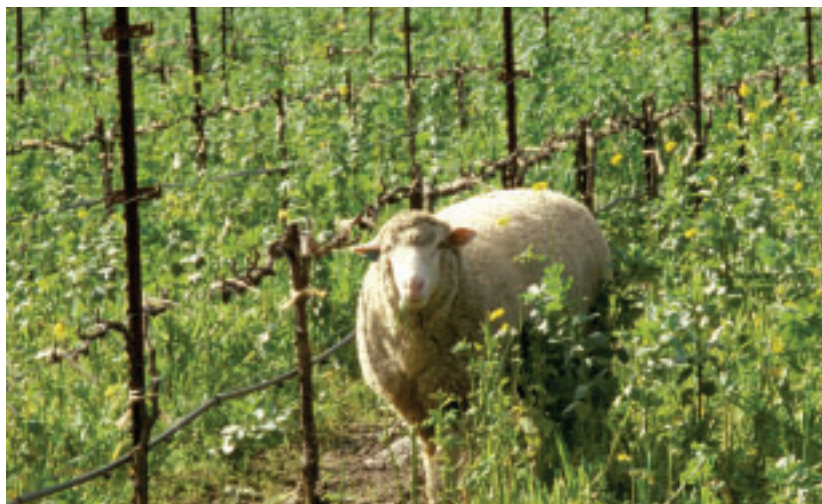
Ceágo Vinegarden

by Rachel Williford
Photos courtesy of featured property

Through the utilization of biodynamic farming, this California winery is opening our eyes to a deeper shade of “green.”



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It has become expected that everywhere we turn, new advancements in technology will be in bloom. Yet where once a carefree attitude towards pollution and chemically treated foods reigned, there are now those who look with opened eyes towards smoggy horizons and ask important questions about the future. A craze of organic foods, chemical-free cleaning products and “hybrid” automobiles has proven to be more than a passing fad – not only due to the potential for improved health, but for the now understood *quality* of these goods (an organic peach clearly possesses more flavor than its pesticide-treated counterpart). This social movement to “get back to nature” doesn’t stop with organics – a new philosophy in natural farming is making waves... and it’s splashing right into your wine glass.

“There is something spiritual about eating vegetables grown from your own garden,” said winemaker Jim Fetzer of Ceágo del Lago in Lake County, California. We were seated together at the head of a long table at the restaurant Mosaic in Troon North, conversing over a five-course tasting menu showcasing the culinary gift of slow-food enthusiast Deborah Knight while enjoying pairings of Ceágo’s own biodynamically produced wines. The first course, a small plate of Black Mesa goat cheese, candied mandiquat and a crispy lavosh, was paired with a 2003 sauvignon blanc out of Ceágo’s Kathleen’s vineyard. Even Jim seemed surprised at the flavors expressed within his glass. “It is so pure,” he said, marveling at the wine’s inherent fruit profile enhanced by Chef Knight’s pairing.

But the event that evening wasn’t really about the wine or the incredible food; it was meant to inspire an awakening within dinner guests. Jim and his team at Ceágo del Lago have been working tirelessly to promote the benefits of biodynamic agriculture, a farming philosophy that promotes soil health by utilizing materials found entirely within a farm’s natural ecosystem.

When the Fetzer family, consisting of Jim and 10 of his siblings, sold their namesake winery in 1992, a buying contract prohibited the clan from making wine for eight years. Once the contract expired, several of the Fetzer “kids” set out upon individual winemaking ventures. “Organic growing has always been in my blood,” Jim said, explaining that, at the time of its sale, Fetzer Winery was already producing a large yield of organic grapes under Jim’s direction. In 2001, Jim purchased the 220-acre Clear Lake property between the California towns of Lucerne and Nice located on the well-traveled Highway 20. The idea was to build a biodynamic farm that could be enjoyed by the public, promoting his agricultural philosophies while sharing his exceptional wines.

Biodynamic farming epitomizes the idea of getting “back to nature” and even predates organic growing by 20 years, nourishing soil deeper than even sustainable methods can. Farming *sans* pesticides is only the



Jim Fetzer

beginning, as an entire ecosystem must be established in order to control every aspect of the growing conditions within the farm. Cover crops, wild and domesticated animals, beneficial insects, controlled compost and even solar and lunar cycles play a role in the creation of a wine that is as pure as untouched mountain spring water. The difference in taste, when compared to traditional wines, is remarkable.

Beneath the soil, microorganisms and nutrients enliven the plant roots. Above the soil, a herd of 40 sheep are in charge of weed control (and the production of compost), chickens roam the vineyards on pest-control duty (and egg-laying duty for the workers' organic breakfast feasts), and cover crops of nuts, lavender and olive trees strategically planted around the property serve as insect diversions as well as a surplus of additional produce. "The system is self-sufficient," Jim explained.

Soon, visitors of Ceágo del Lago will be able to experience more than just a great glass of wine. Jim's biodynamic philosophy is expanding to include a resort-style agricultural development complete with spa, housing, hotel rooms, restaurants and winemaking facilities. Ceágo del Lago Wine County Resort & Spa will include the plantings of grapes, walnuts, lavender, olives, figs and food gardens along with grazing animals beneficial to the



land's self-sufficient ecosystem. The project will promote agro-eco-tourism within all of Lake County, increasing the economic value of the community and educating visitors on the area's beauty and heritage.

For Jim, the venture has brought him back in touch with the spirit of wine. "And it's changed the way I eat," he admitted, explaining that the use of biodynamics in not only his wine but in his vegetable gardens and meat has introduced him to new levels of flavor he could never have expected. The quality at Ceágo isn't going unnoticed, and once the resort is completed, Jim predicts that quality will be impossible to ignore. The hope is that his efforts, along

with the growing number of other agricultural areas modifying their land to meet biodynamic standards, will wake up the mainstream public to the benefits of eating, drinking and living *au naturale*. As Jim took a sip of the 2001 muscat cannelli being served with our final course, a dessert of poja berry tartlet with a ginger-scented crême *patissière*, his eyes widened, clearly impressed. "It's just so pure," he said. "I'm really enjoying this." Judging by the rousing applause, so was everyone else that evening. ❌

■ **Ceágo del Lago**
www.ceago.com

