

FETZER'S LAKE WINERY OPENS: \$10 MILLION PROJECT KEY PART OF NORTH SHORE REVIVAL

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BY MIKE GENIELLA

As a glorious fall sunset sweeps across Clear Lake, vintner Jim Fetzer's new shoreline winery **Ceago Del Lago** appears as a vision of an early California hacienda.

Glowing in the fading light are rust-colored tile roofs that cap a compound of adobe-like buildings. Palm trees sway in the evening breeze, as if keeping rhythm to the sounds of waves lapping a mile-long, largely undeveloped shore.

Native oaks, willows and tules attract a multitude of wildlife, including great white egrets nesting in trees and marsh wrens feasting on insects skittering across the surface of what may be the oldest freshwater lake in North America.

"I've traveled around the globe, and this is truly one of nature's great oases," Fetzer said.

For Fetzer, former president of Mendocino County's Fetzer Vineyards, Clear Lake's North Shore is home to his most ambitious wine venture yet. To date, he's spent \$10 million to develop **Ceago**, a complex between Nice and Lucerne that he calls "a work in progress." An adjoining high-end spa and hotel is on the drawing board.

Today, for the first time, Fetzer will open **Ceago's** doors to the public at 10 a.m. Today and Sunday, the winery will celebrate what Fetzer calls the largest "holistic" grape-growing venture.

Fetzer's goal is for **Ceago** to become the California wine industry's showcase for organic and biodynamic grape-growing practices, providing tours, lectures and seminars on how to merge the best of old-world farming techniques with the latest winemaking technology.

While grape-growing techniques are Fetzer's primary focus, the **Ceago** development highlights a slow but steady transformation of the once-seedy North Shore.

Beyond the Fetzer investment, an estimated \$150 million in public and private investments over the past five years have been pumped into a shoreline strip from Upper Lake to Clearlake Oaks.

Lake County Supervisor Gary Lewis said that with Fetzer's support, redevelopment of the North Shore "is light years ahead of where we thought it would be now."

Besides Fetzer, there's been an influx of other new wineries to the North Shore, including Shannon Ranches, Tulip Hill and Brassfield Estate, Lewis said.

Major projects have included a \$15 million Worldmark time-share vacation resort at Nice and the \$7.5 million expansion of nearby Robinson Rancheria Casino and Hotel.

There's also been refurbishment of lakeside tourist accommodations, including Gingerbread Cottages and

Featherbed Railroad Resort, two bed-and-breakfast inns in Nice where overnight rates during the summer can run as high as \$185.

In nearby Upper Lake, a multimillion-dollar renovation of the historic Riffe's Hotel has been launched by new owners Lynne and Bernie Butcher of San Francisco. In Lucerne, two major commercial construction projects have been completed in recent months.

"There's much more to come," Lewis said.

The county, through its redevelopment agency, is spending millions of dollars to buy up lakefront parcels so there can be a public shoreline promenade at Lucerne, Lewis said.

In addition, the communities of Upper Lake, Nice, Lucerne and Clearlake Oaks have each adopted village development themes, including an early California look for Nice.

Lewis said the opening of Fetzer's project typifies the multitude of changes under way in an area that travelers along Highway 20 between the Sacramento Valley and the North Coast used to ignore.

"The economy of Lake County is turning around. We're achieving a stability that's been missing for decades," Lewis said.

At **Ceago**, Fetzer is banking on his

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past successes with organic farming and ecological business practices. He has brought his daughter, Katrina, and son, Barney, into his new venture, following a Fetzer family tradition established before Fetzer Vineyards was sold in 1992 to liquor conglomerate Brown-Forman of Kentucky.

“Together, we're going to demonstrate how biodynamic viticulture practices improve soil fertility, and produce the highest-quality fruit possible,” Fetzer said.

The process is complex but essentially involves no use of chemically synthesized fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides or fumigants. There are no hormones, antibiotics or genetically modified organisms allowed. Instead, the basis of crop fertility is compost, manures, green manuring and crop rotations, along with regular applications of biodynamic compost preparations and field sprays. Weeds are controlled by cultivation, and mechanical methods.

Ceago has its own flock of sheep, which are allowed by Chilean-born vineyard manager and winemaker Javier Meza to graze among the grapevines to keep grasses and weeds down. Chickens roam the grounds freely, pecking at insects on the loose.

The hacienda-like compound at the heart of the lakefront Fetzer property is surrounded by gardens, fields of lavender, kiwis, olives, walnuts and figs. Inside are prep and demonstration kitchens, dining facilities, reception areas, barrel storage and the requisite tasting room.

Fetzer is planning to eventually develop an “all natural” spa and guest quarters at the site.

He already has a 340-foot pier -- the longest on Clear Lake -- for boaters headed to **Ceago**. Fetzer said he needed the long pier to ensure that larger boats could tie up, given that lake depths are typically 30 feet or less along his shoreline.

Ceago Del Lago's name refers to the the compound's natural surroundings. **Ceago** is derived from a local Pomo Indian word meaning “grass seed valley.”

“Like the Native Americans who were here before us, we believe that people must interact with the land in an essential, nurturing fashion to assure long-term quality and prosperity,” Fetzer said.

Ceago produces 5,000 cases of wine annually, marketing wine priced from \$16 to \$32 a bottle. It is made from grapes grown at the Fetzer family's 55-acre Home Ranch in Redwood Valley, at the original winery there. Another 70 acres of grapes have been planted at the new **Ceago** complex, straddling both sides of Highway 20.

When the vineyards come into full production, Fetzer plans to build the **Ceago** label to about 15,000 cases. He also is introducing a second label called Tule Bay wines, which will sell for \$12.95 a bottle.

But to Fetzer, **Ceago** will be more than wine. Sitting at the end of the pier on a recent evening, Fetzer gazed across the lake to a string of twinkling lights of shoreline communities.

“This is as good as it gets,” he said.