

Jim Fetzer's Sandbox

Ceàgo del Lago signals a new age of responsible farming.

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Although I live in Sonoma County, I rarely make my way to neighboring Lake County. I am not alone. Tasters and tourers — wine writers, too — tend to overlook this fourth member of the North Coast appellation in their love affair with Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino. Yet Lake County, like the well-visited big three, is also an agricultural Eden where everything from pears to nuts to acres of premium grapes flourish. So, where are the swirlers and sippers?

An obvious reason for their absence is that Lake has but six wineries. The big three seem to have wineries from every bend in the road. (Ironically it is to many of those wineries that most of Lake County's 8,000 acres of grapes go.) Another reason is that Lake County is not that easy to get to. Mountain roads, scenic roller coasters, tie the county to the better-known three — routes that once brought turn-of-the-century vacationers via stage coach to the county's glittering centerpiece, Clear Lake, and to the world-famous, hot-spring spas in its surrounding hills.

Lake County remained a popular destination until the 1950s when better highways into the Sierras made Lake Tahoe the "in" place to summer. In many ways, Clear Lake, especially along its northern shore, has remained stuck in the now shabby remnants of its heydays. Today, however, a multi-million dollar food, wine and farm center with a decided Fetzer twist is destined to change all that.

Recently I took one of the roller coaster rides to Lake County to see what Jim Fetzer was up to. Mid-way between two down-at-the-heels resort villages, optimistically named Nice and Lucerne,



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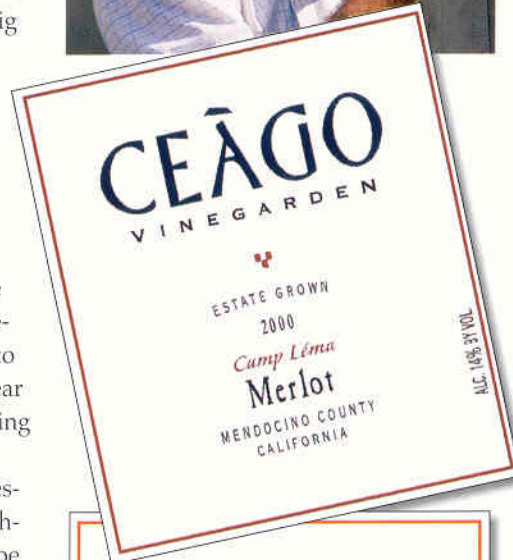
Jim Fetzer, owner, Ceàgo del Lago in Lake County

there it was — Ceàgo del Lago — an architecturally glorious, Hacienda-style compound sprawling center stage on a long stretch of pristine, lakefront acreage. A piece of wine-country's mystique and pizzazz had crossed over the hills.

To understand what Jim Fetzer has undertaken in Lake County, one must step back to 1958 when lumber executive Barney Fetzer and his wife Kathleen bought a 720-acre ranch in Mendocino County's Redwood Valley and began to grow grapes. Ten years later, Fetzer released its first commercial vintage, 25,000 cases of red table wine. Through the years, more Mendocino acreage was acquired, including the 1,130-acre Sundial Ranch near the village of Hopland. In 1981, Barney Fetzer died unexpectedly, leaving Kathleen and their eleven children, six boys and five girls, to carry on.

Three years later, they bought the nearby Valley Oaks Ranch and transformed it into an acclaimed food and wine center with increased attention paid to organic and biodynamic farming. In 1992, Kentucky-based Brown-Forman Corporation bought Fetzer Vineyards for a reported \$82 million. Production by then was two-and-a-half million cases a year.

With that, the Fetzers signed an eight-year, no-competition agreement that prohibited the family from producing anything liquid, whether that be beer, bottled water, soft drinks or, most certainly, wine. They could, however, grow grapes.



Jim Fetzer, sibling number four, bought the McNab Ranch near the Mendocino County town of Ukiah. Building on what they had learned at Valley Oaks, they transformed what was then a 1400-acre rundown ranch into a model of organic, biodynamic and sustainable farming. Grapes — Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petite Syrah — shared space with sheep and chickens, olives and lavender, fruits, vegetables and herbs.

They called their enterprise Ceàgo Vineyard, with “Ceàgo” derived from a Pomo Indian word meaning “grass seed valley.” Their goal was to interact with the land in a holistic fashion, much like the Pomos who once lived in the area.

When the no-competition agreement with Brown-Forman Corporation was up, Jim Fetzer was ready to go with his Ceàgo label, which entered the marketplace in 2002 with a 100-percent Sauvignon Blanc and a 100-percent estate-grown McNab Ranch Merlot. Also ready were his plans to showcase Ceàgo del Lago.

Jim Fetzer is on hand to greet me as I drive through Ceàgo del Lago’s gates. “Lake County has always been important to Fetzer,” he tells me. “Some 30 percent of our Cabernet and Zinfandel grapes were sourced here. Growing up, I came here often with my dad to talk with growers.”

One piece of property, a 270-acre parcel of mostly walnut orchard on the north shore of Clear Lake, had long caught his eye. Two years ago he negotiated to buy it, selling his prized McNab Ranch to Brown-Forman for its Bonterra label. Here he would build what he calls in one breath, “my sandbox,” and in the next, “my dream.”

Fetzer can hardly wait to walk me through the 40,000-square-foot compound, the project’s heart, pointing out the intricately tiled roofs, the thick walls constructed of recycled material that mimic adobe. We enter prep and demonstration kitchens, dining facilities, spaces for small conferences, tasting and barrel storage rooms. We peek



into bed and breakfast rooms readied for guests — a complex of lakefront casitas are yet to be built. Courtyards and walkways tie all together.

Fig trees, arbors dripping with kiwi, towering sunflowers, clumps of lavender, olive groves, gardens filled with edible flowers, vegetables and herbs keep company with stands of 80-year-old walnut trees. Cypress groves and plantings of spiky agave emphasize the area’s Mediterranean climate. Mature palm trees, unwanted specimens moved from northern California gardens, wave in the breeze. Seventy acres, with more acreage earmarked for future planting, claim vineyards of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Cabernet Franc, and Sauvignon Blanc. So lovely is Ceàgo del Lago that it is easy to forget that its main purpose is educational, the promotion of a new age of responsible farming.

I jump into Fetzer’s truck to take a farming-practices tour. He points out planted habitat breaks that keep pests from moving from one block of vines to another while encouraging beneficial insects to stay, and the sheep that not only provide manure for compost but also mow the vineyard floor when the vines are dormant. We stop to admire a flock of chickens, Rhode Island Reds. “For some reason they are a breed best able to protect themselves from the hawks and golden eagles that fly over the ranch,” Fetzer says, as he points out the rolling chicken coop that allows the Reds to be moved freely about the vineyards to forage for the cutworms so deadly to vine roots. “In the process, they supply enough eggs to keep all on the ranch well fed at breakfast,” he adds.

“To be sustainable,” Fetzer explains as we drive along, “a farm must draw on itself to produce high quality foods while protecting its resources and profitability.” And how might he define biodynamic farming? Fetzer’s answer comes quickly, learned while developing his McNab Ranch, which was certified biodynamic by the Demeter

Association in 1997. “Biodynamic moves beyond organic and the non-use of chemical ‘cides’ to include the nurturing of crops by rotation and the use of beneficial insects and plants,” he says, and then adds, without missing a beat, “cultivation in harmony with cosmic forces and celestial events. Everything is used, everything is re-used, everything contributes to the enterprises’ practical harmony.”

Before leaving Ceàgo del Lago, we walk out to the end of what is Clear Lake’s longest pier, built by Fetzer to accommodate boaters coming across what is California’s largest natural lake. We look across at Mount Konocti, an extinct volcano whose eruptions contributed to the growing qualities of Lake County’s soil. Fetzer points out the long pipes under the pier that deliver abundant water to the property. “One of the reasons I found the property so desirable,” he says, “is that water rights were grandfathered in from the previous ownership.”

As I leave, Fetzer hands me a bottle each of the Ceàgo Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc. “We wanted the wines to stand on their own among the best of the best of premium wines without emphasizing that they were organically and biodynamically produced,” he says. “I think we succeeded. Let me know if you agree.”

Along with the wines, he offers something else to take with me — a carton of eggs, gathered just that morning, a gift from the Rhode Island Reds.

Meanwhile, other members of the Fetzer clan are not standing still. John Fetzer, eldest of the brothers, has built a massive wine cave north of Hopland, the first in Mendocino County, where he will age his Saracina Vineyards wines. Dan Fetzer has invested at least \$2 million in his Hopland Jeriko Vineyards estate winery. Joe Fetzer, affectionately called Mendo Joe, is launching a value-priced Chardonnay called Mendocino Gold.

As far as Lake County is concerned, however, the big news is Ceàgo del Lago. As one Lake County supervisor put it, “Those Fetzers know how to do things right.” ☐