

## A different kind of wine

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Egg whites from free-range chickens. Manure buried in cow horns. Farming timed to lunar cycles. Jim Fetzer uses biodynamics to make...

BY JOHNATHAN L. WRIGHT

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Chickens love Jim Fetzer.

One Rhode Island Red, a hen particularly ample of breast and fleet of claw, bounded toward him the other morning as he stood in the vineyard at Ceago Del Lago, the biodynamic farm and wine center he built on the shore of California's Clear Lake, about two hours north of Sacramento and four hours west of Reno in Lake County.

It could simply have been the expectation of feed, but the hen appeared happy to see Fetzer and ready to flap into his arms.

"The chickens, they're my girls," he said of his free-range flock.

They are much more than that.

Biodynamics is a "supercharged" system of organics in which the ban on chemical pesticides and fertilizers is combined with farming practices that incorporate diverse crops and livestock and native flora and fauna. The goal is for the land to remain fertile, for the elements of the farm to support each other in self-sustaining synergy, and for crops to achieve the truest and best expression of their texture and flavor.

To that end, the chickens eat pests and produce waste for the compost that fertilizes Del Lago's vineyard and garden. Their eggs are served at staff breakfasts and in the Courtyard CafA(c). At Ceago ("see-AH-go") Vinegarden, Fetzer's vineyard and winery in neighboring Mendocino County, foamy egg whites are stirred into wine so that impurities attach themselves.

"It's a natural filter for the wine," said Javier Tapia Meza, Ceago's director of winemaking and viticulture.

The buzz on the Clear Lake region is that it offers the experience of Napa and Sonoma counties 20 years ago -- wine produced with passion, but without crowds or attitude.

The folks at Ceago hope that increasing interest in biodynamic winemaking -- witness a slew of recent, high-profile press reports -- will help foster agricultural tourism that blends wine tasting and education, local food, and recreational activities like swimming, sailing, fishing and hiking with responsible development of Lake County's agricultural land.

"We want to grow the county as well as the winery," said Josh Metz, Ceago's sales director. "If development has to happen, this is the kind of development we want to see."

Biodynamic beforehand

Fetzer, a scion of the famous winemaking clan, is a local boy. He grew up with 10 brothers and sisters at his family's Home Ranch in Mendocino County, and his mother, Kathleen Fetzer, still lives there, rooted in a half century of vine and tradition.

"We had vineyards, pears, alfalfa fields, animals, oak woodlands, conifers -- we lived in a really biodynamic way before we knew what it was," Fetzer said, adding that his family abandoned biodiversity in the 1970s as Fetzer Vineyards expanded and land became devoted only to growing grapes.

In 1992, after his family sold the Fetzer Vineyards name and company for a reported \$80 million, an eight-year non-compete agreement prevented Fetzer from making or selling beverages. But he could grow and sell grapes, and he did so beginning in the mid-'90s -- this time studying and then applying the principles of biodynamics, a movement that began in Europe in the 1920s.

Some of these principles involve field preparations made from manure buried in cow horns and the timing of certain farming activities to solar and lunar cycles. Such practices strike many as esoteric at best, and so Fetzer always emphasizes that they are part of a larger system. As selling points for Ceago wines, Fetzer concentrates on the environmental benefits of biodynamic farming (no chemicals, resource recycling) and on the "clean, pure" wine flavors that he said resulted, flavors that reflected the "true character" of a vineyard's fruit.

"First of all, before anything else, the wine has to be good," Fetzer said.

In praise of sauvie

That approach, mixing flavor with philosophy, is the right one, according to Northern Nevada wine professionals.

"I would never use biodynamics alone to sell the wine," said Dan Stach, a Reno wine salesman who doesn't rep Ceago. "That could frighten more than it attracts."

Ceago's Mendocino and Clear Lake vineyards, about 70 planted acres in all, together produce about 8,000 cases of wine annually, mainly sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, merlot, cabernet sauvignon and syrah; a first-ever port is now aging.

Local wine professionals called Ceago's merlot "supple and complex." The sauvignon blanc, Ceago's flagship wine, received uniform praise for its bracing leanness balanced by fruit and a brushstroke of effervescence (a byproduct of carbon dioxide in the winemaking process).

"You can really smell and taste the origin of the wine in the finished product," Stach said. "I like that."

Boat and sip

In 2001, Fetzer bought the 163-acre Ceago Del Lago spread, which enjoys three-quarters of a mile of lakefront near Nice, a village, pronounced like its French counterpart, on Clear Lake's northeastern shore. Fetzer said he has spent about \$11 million so far acquiring and developing the property. From the beginning, the compound was meant to be not just an exercise in biodynamic winemaking, but also a demonstration of a sustainable ecosystem.

The vaguely Mediterranean main building, which was built using a recycled foam material called "Perform Wall," encompasses courtyards, the cafA(c), meeting rooms, an outdoor kitchen festooned with flowers in jars and bunches of dried corn, a winery store, and a tasting room set with tapestries based on photographs of local Pomo Indians and furniture made from local willow and recycled barrel staves.

A restaurant is being built, and Fetzer said he has received approval for a spa, a 50-room hotel, and fractional-ownership casitas on both the lake and mountain sides of the property. He estimated build-out would take two to five years.

Kayaks, boats and San Francisco Seaplane Tours often pull up to Ceago Del Lago's dock.

"This is the only California winery I know of where you can boat to the tasting room," Fetzer said.

Eco-connections

Palms recycled from owners who didn't want them frame the main building and a view that whooshes from the entrance through a courtyard and on to Clear Lake in the distance. Valley oaks, perhaps 500 years old and some at least 100 feet high, ring the edge of the property. Bachelor buttons and poppies populate the vineyard rows.

An olive grove sits next to the vineyard and produces about 120 gallons of olive oil annually, which is used in-house and bottled for sale at the store. The store also sells candied walnuts (from trees that came with the property) and essential oils made from a lavender plot that stretches almost to the lake.

Depending on the season, the gardens yield garlic, Italian red and Walla Walla white onions, tomatoes, basil, artichokes, yarrow (an aromatic herb), apples, pears, figs and kiwis, which grow on trees in a trellised cluster. One garden also contains rows of cypress trees and blue agave cacti.

"It's landscaping inventory," Fetzer said. "You grow your own."

A flock of 22 Rambouillet sheep tufted a meadow beyond the chicken coop. The sheep, like fowl, do their part: They provide wool, meat that Fetzer butchers himself, manure and bedding for the compost pile and a healthy appetite for weeds.

"We just move them along the lakeshore," Fetzer said.

The lake itself supports otters, turtles, grebe, osprey, fat-bottomed ducks diving for worms and, occasionally, a bald eagle, which Fetzer can see from his office.

One recent evening, Fetzer, Tapia Meza and Metz entertained visitors at a Ceago Del Lago dinner featuring lavender and onion accents, grilled asparagus, and English peas tossed with olive oil and sea salt -- all from the garden -- as well as grilled lamb chops from the flock.

One guest at dinner remained silent. She was a mallard nesting in one of the giant, shrub-filled pots near the dinner table. Her flank shifted to reveal a clutch of eggs.

"Even the ducks like hanging out at Del Lago," Fetzer said. "We share the lifestyle."

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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