

Sunset

LIVING IN THE WEST



Gina Sabatella

Wine scion Jim Fetzer steers his powerboat (with daughter Katrina aboard) across Northern California's Clear Lake toward his Ceàgo Del Lago winery.

A day in Clear Lake, California With new wineries, restaurants, and places to stay, Lake County (north of Napa) looks better than ever

by Amy Wolf

[Travel planner: adventures, hotels, and wineries](#)

By the time we arrive at Ceàgo Del Lago Winery, on the northwestern shore of Lake County's Clear Lake, we've seen far more birds than people. Western grebes, thousands of them, bob peacefully until our boat gets directly in front of them. Then they dive upside down like toy ducks, showing their black-and-white behinds before disappearing under the surface.

So when we pull up to Ceàgo, we're almost surprised to see a couple of bass fishermen casting right off the dock. People at last!

"Catch anything?" my husband calls out.

"Nah," says one, without looking up. His friend chimes in, "But at least it's a nice place to hang out." And then, gesturing to Ceàgo: "And the wine over there's pretty good too."

The scene sums up what's so nice about visiting Northern California's Lake County, especially this time of year, with temperatures still mild. Even with a burgeoning wine scene, Lake County is still first and foremost a haven of water recreation and summertime fun. If you're looking for the opposite of tony Napa, it doesn't get much more un-Napa than this.

The fun center of the wine country

Two-and-a-half hours north of San Francisco and two hours northwest of Sacramento, Clear Lake has long been party central for college kids drawn here for water-skiing, boating, and concerts at Konocti Harbor. Though that element certainly still exists, now there are also a few very sophisticated restaurants and hotels (the Blue Wing Saloon and the Tallman Hotel, most notably), as well as 10 or so worthwhile wineries. Among those is the only boat-in winery we've ever heard of. It's a concept we can't resist. Roy Disney, of Disney's Boat Rentals, sets us up at the boat launch in Lakeport, instructing us to head east first to "the Narrows," where the north arm of the lake connects to the south arm, before the lake gets choppy. He tells us how to use Mt. Konocti — the once-active volcano that looms several thousand feet above the lake — as a landmark, and invites us to call his cell phone if we lose our bearings.

Though it's still morning, we're dying to check out Ceàgo — we'll have just a sip, we rationalize. We head north toward the lake's western shore, passing Clear Lake State Park. We briefly consider stopping here for a hike (the park has boat access as well), but decide against it, figuring that today should be all about boat rides and decadence. A few miles northwest of the park, we glimpse the dock of Ceàgo, looking like an arm outstretched in a gesture of welcome. After we've chatted with the fishermen, we tie up the boat and walk up the dock into a Mediterranean-style garden that could easily be mistaken for one beside Italy's Lake Como. A lavender-lined path leads through gardens framed by olive trees. In front of us is a courtyard where a fountain burbles and festive music plays. People come and go in and out of a tasting room tucked into a series of hacienda-style buildings. The place feels more like a spa than a winery — and in fact, it will eventually be both, Jim Fetzer tells us.



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The Saw Shop Gallery Bistro in Kelseyville has some of the best food in the county.

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generations of the Fetzer often gather in the open-air yard of Ceàgo Del Lago for wine, which is sold in the room.

Fetzer, whose family produced an annual 2.5 million cases of wines in the 1980s and '90s, discovered Lake County as a teenager, when his father used to take him on grape-buying trips. After the Fetzer family sold the company and the name, Jim bought a 163-acre piece of prime lakefront property in the then not-so-nice town of Nice (pronounced like the city in France) and set about creating the county's first resortlike destination. He plans to break ground on the spa as well as a restaurant in two to three years.

"Lake County could be the fun center of the wine country," Fetzer says, gesturing out to the lake, where a seaplane is floating, flanked by a group of teenagers sunning themselves on inner tubes. After calling out a welcome to the group — which, it turns out, is celebrating a birthday out here on the lake — Fetzer tells us about the seaplane access he's just created, and the ferry system he's working on putting in place. He talks about Lake County's clean air (the best in the state, he claims), the lack of fog, the tremendous birdlife. "Being on the lake, making wine, it doesn't get much better," he says.

On the way back to Lakeport, at Fetzer's urging, we stop at Rodman Slough, a wetlands preserve just a few miles west of Ceàgo. We kill the engine, and slowly, an Audubon scene comes to life before our eyes: A great blue heron stands stately in the tulle reeds; a grebe dives for its prey. I say that I can't believe all the birdlife here.

"Why not?" my husband replies. "It's a pretty nice place to hang out."

GETTING THERE

To get to Lakeport from San Francisco, take U.S. 101 north to Hopland, then head east on State 175. Visit the [Lake County Visitor Information Center](#) (800/525-3743) for more information.

EXPLORE BY BOAT

Disney's Boat Rentals Family-operated, and one of several boat rental outfitters in town. Ask for directions to Rodman Slough and Ceàgo Del Lago Winery. From \$145 for 3 hours; 401 S. Main St., Lakeport; 707/263-0969.

ARRIVE BY PLANE

San Francisco Seaplane Tours Hourly departures whisk you from Mill Valley to Ceàgo Del Lago Winery in 35 minutes. Reservations required; call for prices; 242 Redwood Hwy., Mill Valley; 415/332-4843.

WHERE TO EAT AND SLEEP

Blue Wing Saloon Great food adjoining the Tallman Hotel. INFO: \$\$; 9550 Main St., Upper Lake; 707/275-2233.

The Bungalow The Arts and Crafts-style B&B offers an elaborate breakfast, use of a kayak and rowboat, and an outdoor living room right on the lake. INFO: 3 rooms from \$125; 707/998-0399.

Saw Shop Gallery Bistro The art-filled restaurant serves some of the county's best food. INFO: \$\$\$; closed Sun–Mon; 3825 Main St., Kelseyville; 707/278-0129.

Tallman Hotel A destination in its own right, with antiques-filled cottages, private outdoor soaking tubs, and flower and vegetable gardens (in full bloom this month). INFO: 17 rooms, suites, and cottages from \$189; 707/275-2244.

WINERIES TO VISIT

Brassfield Estate One of several standout wineries in the area, this 2,500-acre former cattle ranch sits at 1,800-foot elevation in what's known as High Valley. By appointment only; free tastings; 10915 High Valley Rd.; 707/998-1895.

Ceago Del Lago Winery \$5 tastings; 5115 E. State 20, Nice; 707/274-1462.

Steele Wines The oldest and best-known winery in the county; Jed Steele was the first winemaker at Kendall-Jackson. Closed Sun through May 27, open daily starting May 28; \$5 tastings; 4350 Thomas Dr., Kelseyville; 707/279-9475.



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With its lakeside setting, lavender fields, olive and palm trees, and Spanish mission-style buildings, Ceago Del Lago is putting the tiny town of Nice on the map.

LOCAL WINES TO DRINK

Look for great Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc, and more from the hills around Northern California's Clear Lake.

Gregory Graham Rolling Knolls Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc 2005 (Red Hills, Lake County; \$16). Almost a cocktail, with grapefruit juice, peach nectar, and bitters.

Six Sigma Sauvignon Blanc 2006 (Lake County; \$20). Lemon-blossom aromas give way to exuberant grapefruit.

Guenoc Petite Sirah 2004 (Lake County; \$20). Juicy plums and blueberries, hints of orange peel and chocolate.

Obsidian Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 (Red Hills, Lake County; \$27). Earthy forest and tobacco notes, with spicy dark fruit.

Spencer Roloson Madder Lake Vineyard Syrah 2004 (Clear Lake; \$32). Intense blackberries, mint, and black pepper wrapped in cedar.

Steele "Stymie" Founder's Reserve Syrah 2002 (Lake County; \$40). The wild side of Syrah — tobacco, game, and blackberries. —Sara Schneider