



CEÁGO DEL LAGO

California's Jim Fetzer created his dream farm and hacienda on the shores of the state's largest natural lake

At water's edge, the sound of the lake lapping at the tule-lined shore is momentarily interrupted by the distant moan of a boat's engine. As far as the eye can see, a wide expanse of water hosts greb dancing across the surface of Clear Lake.

Magnificently situated on what may be the oldest lake in North America, Jim Fetzer—of California's famed winemaking family—has created a unique and fascinating compound an hour north of California's most well-known wine-growing region, Napa County.



Built with his share of proceeds from the sale of Fetzer Winery in 1992, Ceágo del Lago Vinegarden has risen on the northeast shore of Clear Lake, in the four years since Fetzer acquired the property.

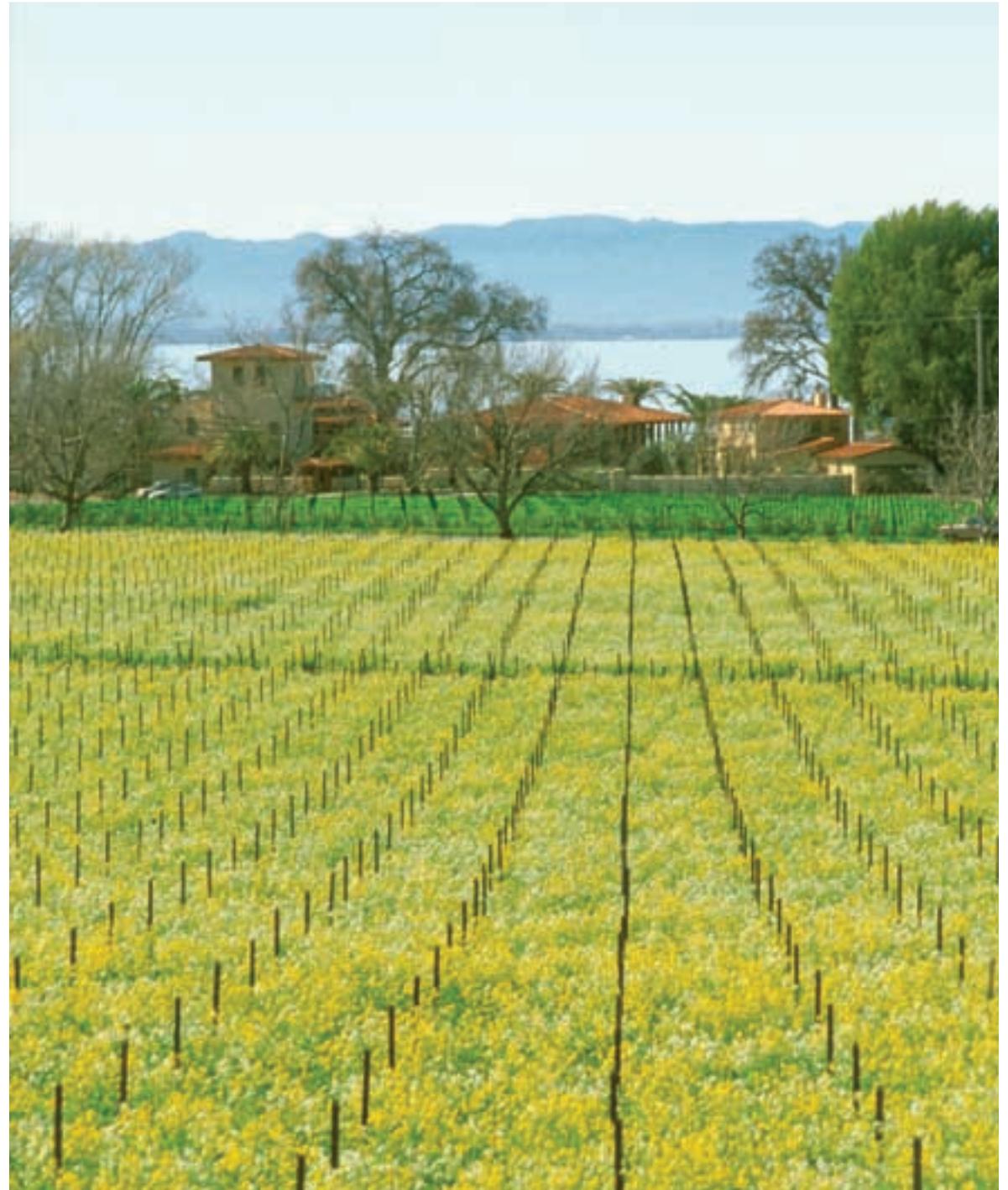
Much of the facility's stunning architecture—more than 20,000 square feet of tile-roofed hacienda, designed around two large courtyards—was inspired by Fetzer's travels throughout Europe, New Zealand, India and Mexico and constructed using wood recycled from the original ranch's buildings, combined with thick "eco-green" walls of Performance Wall—recycled Styrofoam

Left: Jim Fetzer at the family ranch in Redwood Valley. Below: View across Clear Lake to Mt. Konociti from upper acreage of Ceágo del Lago. Opposite: Cover crops of white and yellow mustard and daikon radish cover a bed of strawberry clover in Ceágo's newly planted Sauvignon Blanc vineyard.

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GLEN GRAVES



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filled with cement. The buildings' color was matched to blend with the wheat hue of the lake's dry hills in summer. The compound includes a winetasting room, barrel room, event room and kitchen, offices that look out to the lake and two homes. Winemaker and ranch manager Javier Meza lives with his wife, Claudia, and their two children, Javierita and Barbara, in the house rebuilt on the original house site of the former walnut orchard known as The Barnes Yard, while Jim Fetzer lives on the 2nd floor of the other house.

Visitors to *Ceago del Lago* feel as though they've just arrived at a *hacienda* in Mexico, with a picturesque fountain framed by wrought-iron gates bubbling at the entry and salsa music wafting through the corridors. Wrought-iron chandeliers and fixtures made in Chile as well as handmade tiles that incorporate basket designs of the indigenous Pomo Indians, add to the ambiance. Some two thousand Italian cypress trees—a favorite of bluebirds and said to ward off evil spirits—and tropical palm trees complement the Mediterranean style of this lakefront Valhalla.

Jim Fetzer has always built and grown things. As one of 11 children born to a

Right: Matrarch Kathleen Fetzer and her granddaughter, Katrina, with one of many flower pots on the property (top); Katrina and her brother, Barney, with another.

Above: Architectural details and courtyard appointments at Ceago del Lago. Opposite: A courtyard seating area affords a view of a Ceago outbuilding on Clear Lake's shoreline.

German winemaker, he grew up in Napa Valley, where his father, Bernard (Barney) started the family business in 1968. All the children picked grapes and all were expected to build whatever had to be built to grow the business.

In 1981, their father, shortly after he purchased another vineyard near Hopland (45 minutes from Clear Lake), died. The family had to pull together. Oldest brother John assumed the role of CEO and handled financial matters, sister Patti was in charge of marketing and point-of-purchase and, while Dan designed buildings, peripatetic Jim took to the road and promoted the family-made Fetzer organic wines.

In 1992, when the Fetzer brand exceeded two million cases, the 11 siblings sold their brand to Brown-Forman for \$82 million and were forbidden from using the Fetzer name ever again. The Fetzers also signed a non-compete agreement, which prohibited all family members from making *any* kind of beverage. Jim and his siblings instead enhanced their farming techniques, moving from organic to biodynamic methods.

When the non-compete agreement



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expired in 1990, the Fetzers were ready and launched new wineries like rockets, without resorting to the family name. Hence Ceágo, Masut, Patianna and other new names now grace the labels of Fetzer-made wines..

Ceágo del Lago's 188 acres follow the tule-lined shore of Clear Lake for three-quarters of a mile. On guided tours of the property, and during tastings of wines made from organic and bio-dynamically grown grapes, Jim Fetzer's grown children and employees spend a lot of their time educating visitors about bio-dynamic farming—which is nothing new to the Fetzer family. "We had a diverse lifestyle then and we've come full circle," says the ruggedly handsome gentleman farmer. "We had orchards and alfalfa fields and cows and pigs and chickens. It was bio-dynamic before we knew what that meant."

So, what exactly does bio-dynamic mean? The methods—

This page, top: Friends gather for wine at day's end on Ceágo's football field-length pier, longest on Clear Lake. Left, top: Jim enjoying a sunset dinner with children Barney and Katrina and ranch manager Javier Meza, and wife, Claudia; bottom: The sawdust-floored, chandeliered barrel room. Opposite: Looking back toward Ceágo land from pier's end.

despite sounding like some sort of 21st-century cloning—are, in fact, quite the opposite. Akin to organic gardening, the techniques are based on ancient practices espoused in the 1920s by Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher and founder of the Waldorf School.

According to John Jevons—in his classic paperback *How to Grow More Vegetables...than you ever thought possible on less land than you can imagine*—"the bio-dynamic/French intensive method of horticulture is a quiet, virtually alive art of organic gardening which re-links man with the universe around him—a universe in which each of us is an interwoven part of the whole. People find their places by relating and cooperating in harmony with the sun, air, rain, soil, moon, insects, plants and animals rather than by attempting to dominate them. All these elements teach us their lessons and do the gardening for us if we will only watch and listen. We each become a gentle shepherd providing the conditions for plant growth."

Farming and cultural traditions throughout the world and throughout time have relied on phases of the moon and other aspects of nature not only in the success growing and harvesting fruits and vegetables, but also as auspicious occasions for celebrations (think moon festivals in China and South America) and even using times and locales for cutting hair, birthing or just

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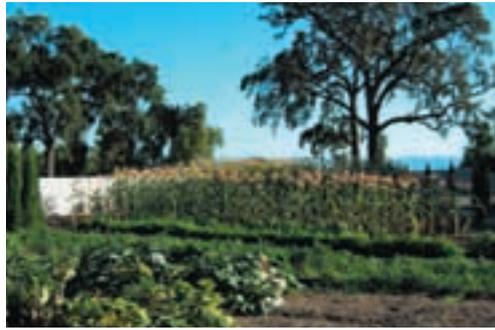
howling at the moon and communing with nature. This is not much different.

"There's a growing movement for bio-dynamic farming in the California wine industry," Fetzer said, over tastings at the end of his pier, "but it's been popular in Europe for decades."

Jim Fetzer's explanation of making wines in the French tradition of *terroire*—or "of the earth":

"In France, the wines are meant to taste akin to the soil from which they grew. Our mission is to craft small lots of wine made from estate-grown, organic and bio-dynamic grapes, using the best of old- and new-world winemaking techniques.

"Bio-dynamic farming is *not* synthetic farming, which incorporates chemicals, growth hormones and/or antibiotics. Bio-dynamic is working with the forces of life to build a farm, to eliminate the inputs and integrate all the parts—raise the sheep for their wool and the chickens for their eggs and grow the tule, then make the compost with the tule and manure from the



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Bio-dynamic farming is an intense organic growing method that incorporates nature, the cosmos, lunar cycles and some rather unorthodox, yet surprisingly effective practices

sheep and the chickens and use the compost in the vineyards to grow the vines and make wine. And it's about keeping the soil healthy. You rotate the crops, you grow different things, you don't discard anything."

Sheep and chickens do indeed roam the vineyards, contributing to the plan—sheep graze and eat cover crops; red wines are clarified with egg whites from the 40 Rhode Island reds residing in a hacienda-style barn. In addition to grapes, the land is verdant with olive and walnuts trees—from which oil is pressed—while cover crops of geraniums, lavender, dandelion, yarrow and chamomile are also part of the bio-dynamic plan. Grape varietals include Cabernet, Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah and

Chardonnay. Smaller plots of Semillion, Malbec, Petite Bordeaux and Cabernet Franc add to the mix, while a garden bursting with melons, tomatoes, eggplant and basil provides good food, as well as future compost material.

Modern technology also plays a role in precision farming: a weather station in Ceágo's vineyards measures and reports wind speed, wind direction, rainfall and temperatures to an office computer every 15 minutes.

"The goal is not to spray, but to use other methods working with the forces of nature," adds Jim, who, when he has to spray, utilizes homeopathic sprays (that encourage photosynthesis), combined with old-fashioned elbow grease. Even organic spraying of soaps or oils on grapes affects the flavor of wines, notes the purist.

"We do a lot of handwork. We open the center of the vines and pick off leaves by hand. The goal is to make the wine in the vineyard stay true to the flavors of nature as much as possible. We try to show the earthy characteristics of the *terroir*. Most sommeliers say our wines are very much in balance. That's due to the farming techniques."

Jim's brother Bobby is also in the bio-dynamic winemaking



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business, under the Masút label. In fact, nine of the 11 Fetzer siblings are involved in some aspect of winemaking. Matriarch Kathleen Fetzer, who resides on the original family ranch in the Redwood Valley 30 minutes north, is the namesake for Ceágo's "Kathleen's Vineyard" Sauvignon Blanc. Two of Jim's children live with here there and work at Ceágo—Katrina, 26, handles marketing and Barney, 24, oversees the vineyards. Their sister, Andrea, recently graduated from law school and is talking about joining them.

With Ceágo wines for sale around the globe, as far away as Austria and Tokyo, Jim Fetzer has plenty of excuses to travel the world and trip the light fantastic, which he admittedly does with fervor.

"I manage with the three d's—dictate, delegate and disappear," the ruggedly handsome Fetzer says, with a sly grin, mentioning heli-skiing in Canada or India or pouring wines at a winemaker event at Lake Tahoe.

Fetzer has an even bigger dream to promote agro-tourism at his lakeside facility, which encompasses a football field-long pier, the largest on the lake, for boaters wishing to tie up and visit the tasting room. "I plan to build a bio-dynamic resort,

This page and opposite: Bio-dynamic participants include Jim, with his tractor (left page) and at home in his vineyard (above), but equally his sheep, chickens, vegetable gardens and tule, all of which contribute to the compost that helps grow the vines for grapes—and ultimately, for winemaking.

with 40 to 80 rooms on the lake and a spa," he says, as a flock of white pelicans soars overhead. "We will have an educational cooking center and a conference center in the next few years. I'd like to have special events centered around olives and walnuts. I want to share my knowledge and teach people how to grow responsibly."

A recently released rosé, named Rosita, was being poured for visitors in the busy tasting room the Sunday afternoon I visited. With a glass of Rosita in hand, I walked out to the end of the Fetzer pier, said *adios!* to the lake and the bird-life and dreamed about returning again, this time to my suite at...Siesta del Ceágo, and to the spa for my mud bath—bio-dynamic, of course.

For more information on the wines, winetasting, special events, the wine club and free-of-charge farming tours, contact Ceágo del Lago Vinegarden, (707) 274-1462. website???