

EAST BAY TIMES

Community Opinion

5/9/17

Now is the time for Lake County getaway — for solitude



The 17-room luxury Tallman Hotel is photographed with the Blue Wing Saloon in the foreground of Main Street in Upper Lake in Lake County. (Ginny Prior/For Bay Area News Group)

When western grebes mate, they literally walk on water in a dancing ritual unlike no other. This is something you see on Clear Lake, the largest natural freshwater lake in California and a birding paradise on the Pacific Flyway.

A pontoon ride with photographer Faith Rigolosi this past weekend revealed vast flocks of eagles, ospreys, ducks, geese and raptors, not to mention blackbirds and grebes. Where have all the birds gone? They've moved here — to Lake County.

And while the Audubon Society has long known about this vital bird haven, a visit in spring offers solitude, free from the summer boating and tourism trade. Now is the time for an overnight getaway to Lake County for birding, wine tasting and the peace that life in the country affords.

When Bernie and Lynne Butcher bought the stately Tallman Hotel in Upper Lake (just north of Clear Lake), they were charmed by the rural beauty of a county with so many lakes and fertile valleys for growing grapes, pears and walnuts. Framed by the Mayacamas Mountain range and the

EAST BAY TIMES

When western grebes mate, they literally walk on water in a dancing ritual unlike no other. This is something you see on Clear Lake, the largest natural freshwater lake in California and a birding paradise on the Pacific Flyway.

A pontoon ride with photographer Faith Rigolosi this past weekend revealed vast flocks of eagles, ospreys, ducks, geese and raptors, not to mention blackbirds and grebes. Where have all the birds gone? They've moved here — to Lake County.

And while the Audubon Society has long known about this vital bird haven, a visit in spring offers solitude, free from the summer boating and tourism trade. Now is the time for an overnight getaway to Lake County for birding, wine tasting and the peace that life in the country affords.

When Bernie and Lynne Butcher bought the stately Tallman Hotel in Upper Lake (just north of Clear Lake), they were charmed by the rural beauty of a county with so many lakes and fertile valleys for growing grapes, pears and walnuts. Framed by the Mayacamas Mountain range and the impressive Mount Konocti, the volcanic land undulates with views that are raw and remarkable.

The Tallman was a popular stagecoach stop for travelers making the journey to the many nearby hot springs. The Butchers found the property in 2003 and Bernie, being a banker turned high school history teacher (his wife was a retired leasing agent looking for her “next project”), bought into the dream.

The town of Upper Lake isn't frozen in time, but time seems more precious here. The Cottonwoods sway gracefully, as if fanning the breeze from the chain of Blue Lakes just a few miles west on Highway 20. The hotel, saloon and livery, are just part of a historic Main Street that seems more like a dream — given the rich natural resources around it.

Nearby, Peruvian cheese maker Javier Salmon tends to his goats and practices the artisan trade that he learned from his father. Olive oil maker Emilio De La Cruz learned his skills as a Greek Orthodox monk. And the winemakers who've come to Lake County learned from their mentors, the art of growing and blending the grapes into top-rated wines in a region known especially for its sauvignon blanc.

This is a place where dreams come true. I saw it repeatedly in the people who came here to be wine makers, shop owners and entrepreneurs like the McCartys, who give wagon rides around Upper Lake, pulled by a team of Live Oak Belgian horses. And that passion touches everyone who visits the quaint town of Upper Lake and its many nearby adventures.

FYI

The Tallman Hotel is a fully restored, 17-room luxury property with a full service bar and restaurant, the Blue Wing Saloon. For more information, go to: www.tallmanhotel.com.

Eyes of the Wild offers wildlife and scenic pontoon boat tours. For more information, go to: eyesofthewild.us.

Lake County Wine Studio offers tastings and purchase of wines from five Lake County American Viticultural Areas. For more information, go to: www.lakecountywinestudio.com.

Chacewater Winery and Olive Mill is open daily for tastings. For more information, go to: www.chacewaterwine.com.