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[Lake County's boutique surprise](#)  
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- Christine Delsol, Chronicle Staff Writer  
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**(06-18) 04:00 PDT Upper Lake, Lake**

**County** -- The last time I'd encountered a shower that looked like some medieval instrument of torture -- but turned out to be quite the opposite -- it was a trendy, seven-nozzle contraption in a Ritz-Carlton spa.

This one, with a Frisbee-sized shower head and horizontal pipes radiating from the main spine to curve around my body like a giant alien's rib cage, wasn't frightening so much as puzzling: What's a Ritz-Carlton shower doing in a sleepy town in Lake County?

The Tallman Hotel, a freshly restored Old West hostelry in Upper Lake, along with an innovative new winery just down the road, is going to do serious damage to Lake County's reputation as a backwater.

Upper Lake is tucked off Highway 20, 5 miles from the northwest end of Clear Lake, where fishing, water sports and funky, 1940s-style resorts draw most of the county's tourists. The region has had a hard time shaking its image as the realm of pear orchards, mobile homes and concerts by aging rock stars at Konocti Harbor, despite a wine industry renaissance that is bringing new hotels and resorts.

With a population of just over 1,000, Upper Lake is Lake County's oldest settlement, and its two-block downtown has the covered sidewalks, wooden facades and proliferation of antiques stores to prove it. Eminently browsable Main Street is so uncrowded, even on weekends, that I felt a little bit conspicuous poking around the shops.

This region is famous for some of California's hottest summers, and even in May, the heat limited my walks around town to a couple of half-hour forays. It was enough to get an impression of streets where pickups outnumber SUVs and big clapboard houses with rose-covered porches hold their own against mobile homes and newer construction.

After checking in at the Tallman, I flopped onto the king-size bed in my roomy, second-story quarters to recover in air-conditioned comfort. The hotel was built in 1895, and the renovation is faithful to the period yet aggressively modern, from its hot tub and high-speed Internet connections to its geothermal and solar energy systems. The Eastlake-style furniture, carved headboard, chandelier, mosaic-tiled bathroom floor, antique fixtures and gravity-flush toilets evoked Victorian style by way of the American West -- graceful but not fussy.

The original hotel has four guest rooms. New garden rooms (patios with Japanese soaking tubs on the ground floor; private balconies on the upper) match the original hotel's rooms right down

to the antique reproductions, 300 thread-count linens and imported Molton Brown bath products. Also new are two cottage suites and a conference space.

My French doors led to a wraparound balcony with a table and chairs where I read, snacked and watched people on the street below. Men in shorts leaned against a pickup, sipping beer; families and clutches of women crossed the street to the adjacent Blue Wing Saloon and Cafe, restored by the same owners and now serving "California comfort food," local microbrews and wines.

When the hotel was new, I would have been watching cowboys and stagecoaches. Upper Lake Pioneer Rufus Tallman built the lodgings, saloon and a livery stable in the late 1890s to serve tourists flocking to the area's numerous mineral springs, spas and resorts. The Tallman's current owners, San Franciscans Bernard and Lynne Butcher, worked from historic photos to reconstruct the saloon, which is connected to the hotel by a shady courtyard with a cool fountain. A local owner has restored the stable, now home to an antique plumbing shop.

Upper Lake offers a wealth of simple pleasures, from the Mendocino National Forest next door to the Robinson Rancheria Casino just down the road. But smart money says the Tallman's chips are on wine touring.

This actually was California's largest grape-producing county before 1921, but it was slow to recover from Prohibition. Today, Lake County is one of the state's fastest-growing wine regions. Its volcanic soil, hot days and cool nights have given rise to four distinct appellations, two of them approved just last year. Locals boast that wines here win more awards per acre than any other region in the world.

The most interesting new winery is Ceago Del Lago on the north shore, 10 minutes from Upper Lake. Brainchild of Jim Fetzer, offspring of the Fetzer Vineyards founders, it produces wines mostly from grapes grown elsewhere, but it also grows some grapes at the lake.

More interesting still is the imposing, hacienda-style compound itself, complete with sheep and chickens. Crossing the patio and walking through acres of lavender to the pier, I half expected to see Zorro stalking through a geranium-fringed doorway with Elena de la Vega on his arm. The estate is also a demonstration garden of biodynamic growing methods, which not only sustain but replenish the land.

I bought a bottle of clear, crisp Muscat made from Clear Lake grapes before returning for a languid dinner of mushroom ravioli at the Blue Wing Cafe. Depleted by heat, wine and a full stomach, I fell asleep while watching the news and didn't face my shower until morning. Following the instructions printed on a card hanging with my waffle-weave robe, I figured out how to balance the water flow.

I used the overhead waterfall shower to soak down, shifted to a gentle spray encircling me from shoulders to calves and then experimented with gradations in between. I discovered so many ways to deliver warm water to tight muscles that I was late for breakfast.

The hotel's staff was too kind to let me go hungry, but even on an empty stomach, I'd have gone home satisfied.

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If you go

Locations are in Upper Lake (Lake County) unless otherwise noted.

## GETTING THERE

Upper Lake is about 5 miles from Clear Lake's northern shore, a 2 1/2-hour drive from San Francisco via Highway 29 through Napa Valley.

## WHERE TO STAY

Tallman Hotel, 9550 Main St. (707) 275-2244, [www.tallmanhotel.com](http://www.tallmanhotel.com). Doubles \$159-\$189 weekends, \$139-\$189 weeknights. Suites \$219/\$199.

Super 8 Motel, 450 E. Highway 20. (707) 275-0888, [www.super8.com](http://www.super8.com). Doubles \$88-\$109 weekends, \$66-\$77 weeknights; holidays higher. Basic but clean and new.

## WHERE TO EAT

Blue Wing Saloon, 9520 Main St. (707) 275-2233, [www.bluewingsaloon.com](http://www.bluewingsaloon.com). Lunch and dinner daily; beer and wine bar 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Lunch entrees \$6.25-\$8.95, dinner \$8.95-\$17.95.

Blue Heron Cafe, 9475 Main St. (707) 275-9021. Mexican food, American breakfasts and burgers, \$4-\$11.

## WHAT TO DO

Ceago Del Lago, 5115 E. Highway 20, Nice. (707) 274-1462, [www.ceago.com](http://www.ceago.com). Tasting room, demonstration gardens, domestic and wild animals. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily.

Robinson Rancheria, 1545 E. Highway 20, Nice. (800) 809-3636, [www.robinsonrancheria.biz](http://www.robinsonrancheria.biz). Hotel, RV park, sports bar, conference center. Open 24 hours

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Lake County Visitor Information, (800) 525-3743, (707) 274-5652, [www.lakecounty.com](http://www.lakecounty.com).

Lake County Wine Tours, (707) 998-4471, [www.lakecountywinetours.com](http://www.lakecountywinetours.com).

*E-mail Deputy Travel Editor Christine Delsol at [travel@sfchronicle.com](mailto:travel@sfchronicle.com).*

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