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JAN 25, 2018 @ 07:04 PM 490 👁

Take a Mid-Winter Wine Break in California's Lake County



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I cover drinks, travel and food, and the intersection of all three. [FULL BIO](#) ▾

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Tallman Hotel

The Tallman Hotel, a beautifully restored 19th century heritage property.

Take a Mid-Winter Wine Break in California's Lake County

Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino -- and usually in that order -- are the spots everyone picks first for a wine country getaway. Yet not much further off and a whole lot less busy sits Lake County. This relatively unexplored wine region has several things going for it. Wine, of course, available at a great value compared to its neighbors.

Classic California beauty, including a stunning lake that's suitable for hiking and picnicking. And an anchor hotel that justifies the nearly 3-hour drive, if you find nothing else that does. But you will.

Lake County Wine

If you're a cash-strapped Cabernet Sauvignon drinker (and who isn't these days), Lake County should be your jam. Vineyards in the appellation of Red Hills boast high elevation and a rich red volcanic soil that contributes a unique profile to the wines. This northern section of the Mayacamas Range delivers perfect warm-day to cool-night temperature swings (known as diurnal shift to wine pros), allowing Cabernet to thrive while developing complexity.

But stats proffered in 2017 to [Sunset Magazine](#) by Peter Molnar, co-owner of [Obsidian Ridge](#), illustrate the chasm in grape prices: \$2500 to \$3000 a ton in Red Hills versus \$8000 to \$12,000 a ton in Napa. Clearly the American market hasn't caught on to the area's potential. Which makes shopping for wine a boon for consumers willing to drive and get it.



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Lovely Petit Verdot from Hawk and Horse.

Lake County is far from Cab country alone, though. Syrah, Viognier, and other Rhone varieties make compelling arguments. Taste the wines of [Sol Rouge](#) for proof. Also located in the Red Hills at elevations over 1800 feet, the 70-acre estate is

currently planted with Mediterranean varieties including Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre – the classic GSM blend. Their transparent winemaking style shows off the sunny fruit and spice, plus mineral undertones of the wines.

If you're up for multiple winery visits, be aware of the driving distances between properties. It's not a bad idea to pick one and spend an afternoon. [Hawk and Horse](#), a biodynamic vineyard, has a bucolic setting. A former tack room converted into a tasting room, and ranch tours available by appointment, give visitors a sense of old California horse country. Before Walmarts, Targets, and Taco Bells flattened the contours of America's landscape. Tracey Hawkins's wines are uniformly excellent, and she's a hoot to hang out with.

For one-stop tasting without the worry of driving, pop into [Lake County Wine Studio](#) in Upper Lake. Located across the street from the Tallman Hotel (where you will be staying), sample half a dozen local wines, then walk back to the Blue Wing for dinner.



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Take a hike around Clear Lake.

Lake County Nature

While the region offers plenty for wine enthusiasts, the chance to get outdoors adds to Lake County's charm. The sparkling crown jewel is, of course, the body of water it's named after: [Clear Lake](#). Visitors can access California's largest natural lake via the state park on its southwestern shore. Once home to Native American fishermen, pioneers arriving in the early 1800s eventually, well, everyone knows how that story ends.

With over 100 miles of shoreline, the lake has become a key driver of tourism. Access to boating, fishing, and camping sites, plus hiking trails, encourage visitors to get out and breathe. In fact, Lake County claims to have some of the purest air in America, as well as the clearest skies at night.

Lakeport is Clear Lake's commercial hub, although it's more of a village and of little interest to tourists unless seeking a fitness class. In that case, [Carve Pilates](#) is a good option: owner Shannon King offers an assortment of energetic workouts including BUTI Yoga, a contemporary hip-shaking spin on the ancient practice.



Tallman Hotel

The original hotel built in the 1870s.

The Tallman Hotel

If any film location scouts are reading this, add the Tallman Hotel to your list.

In 2003, Lynne and Bernie Butcher took a risk. They renovated a derelict property on a rundown street of a forlorn country town. But Upper Lake harbored deep history, and the couple hoped to restore a piece of it.

In the 19th century, pioneers Rufus and Mary Tallman opened the eponymous inn to provide room and board to road weary travelers passing through on Clear Lake's stage lines. Their bustling hotel business turned the area into a resort destination. Visitors came to "take the waters" at the lake.

Eventually, like many small towns across America, Upper Lake faded. Industry moved elsewhere, and struggling folks followed. The Tallman Hotel burnt down, was rebuilt, then eventually abandoned. The adjacent saloon was razed in the teetotaler frenzy of Prohibition.

When the Butchers acquired the property, they discovered the house needed a foundation. They hired a team to lift the building and move it several feet off the street to do the work. Fortunately, much of the redwood structure survived, and original siding and interior materials were cleaned and re-used in the restoration.



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The Butchers recreated the Blue Wing Saloon with historical accuracy.

Reconfiguration and expansion factored heavily into the project. The top floor of the main house went from eight rooms sharing one restroom, to four guest rooms with en-suite. New private baths paid homage to the past with period plumbing fixtures like claw foot tubs and pedestal sinks. The Butchers added a dozen more rooms around the grounds, including two-story cottages in the back. Guests booked in lower garden rooms happily soak in geo-thermally heated Japanese Ofuro tubs on private decks.

By 2006, the fully restored 17-room hotel hosted travelers anew. Further development saw the careful recreation of the historical Blue Wing Saloon. Down the street, they opened a mercantile shop. Soon, other businesses in town followed. A French bakery. The Lake County Wine Studio. An excellent sandwich shop called the Vintage Station Deli which filled the footprint of an old gas station. Now on weekends, visitors stroll a revived main street or relax on the graceful Tallman porch. Sundays see a bluegrass musician playing for patrons noshing on huevos rancheros and drinking Lake County wines.

The revitalization of Upper Lake continues. A country town returned to its roots, encouraging travelers to stop, eat, slake their thirst and rest. Just as their ancestors did a century ago. Except, this is a Lake County getaway you can have today.

When she's not in a vineyard or the ocean, Lauren Mowery covers drinks, food & adventure/luxury travel. Follow her around the world on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).