

<p>■ INSIDE</p> <p>Farewell 2 Crime Watch 4 First Person 5 Art 10 Local History 12 Home Sales 14</p>		<p>■ MUSIC</p> <p>They've Got the Dancing Blues A local couple start their own blues festival PAGE 6</p>		<p>■ REAL ESTATE</p> <p>A Local View of the Market Neighborhood native has a unique perspective PAGE 15</p>
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THE NEW FILLMORE

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They've Got the Blues

Along with their own hotel and saloon, a local couple now have their own blues festival

By Susan Stout

Bernie and Lynne Butcher didn't set out to create a blues music venue in the midst of a small rural town a couple of hours north of their home near Fillmore Street. Nevertheless, the owners of the Tallman Hotel and Blue Wing Saloon are set to present the eighth annual Blues Festival this month from their renovated historic site in the town of Upper Lake.

When the Butchers decided a decade ago to purchase and renovate a decrepit stage-stop hotel from the late 1800s and recreate the adjacent saloon as a restaurant, a music program "was not in the original plans," Bernie said. Neither a stage for bands nor a dance floor were included in the extensive construction.

"It didn't take long to realize that there was a surplus of top-quality musicians and bands in Lake and Mendocino counties," he said. And there was a demand for live music, he discovered, as he worked behind the bar and talked with customers at the saloon soon after it opened in June 2005.

Having vacationed near Clear Lake for more than 20 years, while maintaining their primary home just a few steps from Alta Plaza Park, the Butchers knew the pioneer history of Upper Lake and were determined to build the restaurant based on pictures of a saloon that existed on the site from the 1880s until Prohibition in the 1920s.

Lynne had been restless to take on a new project and the rescue of the 1890s hotel fit the bill. When she spotted the "for sale" sign, the building had been on the market for 40 years, and the town's fire department was preparing to use it for training purposes and burn it down.



Bernie & Lynne Butcher at Blues Fest. Photo by Jim Warren

It took the Butchers a year to formulate their plans, and two more years for construction of the 17-room hotel with gardens, a pool and a spa, which opened in June 2006. The couple had opened the restaurant a year earlier.

Bernie took his customers' suggestions to heart and conceived the idea of bringing diners and music lovers into the saloon on Mondays, one of the slower nights — and a night musicians are not often booked.

Monday Blues at the Blue Wing Saloon was born.

"Monday Blues was a name that caught on," said Bernie. It started with a few bands and individual musicians who would rotate through, but as it grew in popularity, "other great bands came out of the woodwork," he said.

Word spread among musicians that the Blue Wing was a spot where they could land a weeknight gig and get high-quality lodging at the adjacent Tallman Hotel.



Big Mo and the Full Moon Band at the Blue Wing Blues Fest 2014. Photo by Nathan DeHart

Bernie took his idea and expanded it, in addition to the weekly entertainment, to an annual four-day festival. “I tried, for both the Monday night music and the festival, to keep one genre: danceable blues,” he said.

This year, the Blue Wing Blues Festival takes place the first weekend of August and on Labor Day, September 1. Lake County musician Bill Noteman opens Friday, August 1, for the Barry Melton Band.

(Melton is of Country Joe & The Fish fame.) Saturday’s performers are David Landon and featured artist Alvon Johnson. On Sunday, a zydeco trio opens for Big Mo & the Full Moon Band. Alabama Mike & the Hound Kings will open the Labor Day entertainment, and Daniel Castro and his band will close out the festival.

With limited space inside the Blue Wing, the festival is presented in the gardens between the hotel and restaurant. The veranda along the side of the hotel makes a natural stage for the performers while guests enjoy the music from cocktail tables set up in the garden area. The \$50 per person ticket price includes a barbecue dinner.

“Many people don’t realize that the emerging wine area of Lake County is just 2 1/2 hours of pretty easy driving from the San Francisco area,” said Bernie. “Once they’re here, they’ll find a beautiful county, a

first-class place to stay and good food to eat.”

The Butchers present another music program during the winter and spring. “Concerts with Conversation” is a series of presentations in the Tallman Hotel’s conference center, a venue that allows for a more intimate musical experience with a small stage, good acoustics and a few dozen chairs for the audience.

For the Concerts with Conversation program, Bernie drew from his many years as a member of the board of directors of the Community Music Center in the Mission District, which would schedule informal concerts by musicians who were performing elsewhere in the Bay Area. Bernie adapted the concept; at the Tallman, musicians are able to talk to the audience about what they play and answer questions about the music.

“We didn’t anticipate doing so much music,” said Bernie, reflecting on the process of reconstructing the historic hotel and saloon. Yet music is now as much a part of the Tallman Hotel and Blue Wing Saloon as the food, drink and accommodations.

For information about the Blue Wing Blues Festival, visit tallmanhotel.com or call 707/275-2244. The Tallman Hotel, with its adjacent restaurant, is located at 9550 Main Street in Upper Lake.