

March 19, 2004

## JOURNEYS; 36 Hours | Bakersfield, Calif.

By MARC WEINGARTEN - **Wool Grower's mentioned below**

BAKERSFIELD is the land that time and tourists forgot. Its heyday was 150 years ago, when oil was discovered in the Kern River region, bringing wealth-seeking prospectors from all over the country and Europe. Now, this sprawling community (population 250,000) is a ghostly industrial town, a sleepy Nowheresville in which laborers who toil in the San Joaquin Valley farmbelt saunter around with unironic trucker caps perched high on their heads. The city's appeal isn't readily apparent; you have to dig deep into its native culture to discover how sui generis it truly is. It is the country music capital of the West Coast, for starters, and its polyglot culture (Spanish shepherds settled here in the early 1900's) has also made it the United States capital of **Basque cuisine**. In the spring and summer, it becomes a hub for outdoor types, with white-water rafting, bicycling and hiking in the nearby Sequoia Forest. As for tourist-friendly gentrification, forget it. In a state that prides itself on civic reinvention, Bakersfield is refreshingly fossilized. MARC WEINGARTEN

Friday

7 p.m.

### 1. On Time for Dinner

You've got to belly up to the bar if you want to sample Bakersfield's best food. The Noriega Hotel (525 Sumner Street, 661-322-8419), with its well-worn countertop and voluble barkeepers, is the place to go when you're really, really hungry. The Noriega's multicourse Basque feast includes pickled tongue, cabbage soup, spaghetti and sheep cheese washed down with Picon punch, a potent local specialty made from brandy, maraschino syrup and liqueur. The Noriega only has one dinner seating, at 7 each evening, so make reservations and be prompt. Walk-ins and laggards are out of luck.

Saturday

Noon

### 4. **Pink Beans and Salsa**

The most popular Basque restaurant in Bakersfield for a half-century, **Wool Grower's** (620 East 19th Street, 661-327-9584) is packed six days a week with farmers and their clans wolfing down huge family-style meals that might include pork dip, lamb dip (both \$7) and the Basque stew of the day with pink beans and salsa (\$10). And if the tables are taken, you can always eat at the crowded bar, a veritable sea of oily trucker caps.