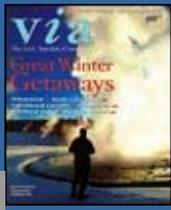




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MARCH 2004

The Nashville of the West



A 1973 Pontiac Granville signed by Elvis is parked behind the bar at Buck Owens' Crystal Palace.

By [Josh Sens](#)

Buck Owens' Crystal Palace on Buck Owens Boulevard is a concert hall that houses a bronze Buck Owens statue, display cases packed with Buck Owens platinum albums, and a 1973 Pontiac Granville convertible signed by Elvis, perched above the bar. Of course, the most popular Buck Owens—related attraction is a lifelike piece of country memorabilia known as Buck Owens himself.

Every Friday and Saturday night, the former *Hee Haw* cohost draws throngs to his saloon-style theater, where he takes the stage with his band, the Buckaroos, and his trademark red-white-and-blue guitar. It's been more than 40 years since Owens recorded "Act Naturally," the first of his 15 consecutive chart-topping singles to hit No. 1. But at 74, he still plays the hard-driving, heart-aching songs (remember "Cryin' Time" or "Together Again"?) that made him famous and earned him credit as a founder of the country music style that aficionados refer to as "the Bakersfield Sound."

You can hear the twang and jangle of the Bakersfield Sound everywhere you go in this sunbaked Central Valley city, which has often been called "the Nashville of the West." Dial your radio to 107.9 and you can even

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Letters

listen to Owens's country music station, KUZZ.

The city has had a kind of dungaree toughness since 1899, when oil was discovered beneath its silty clay soil. When Buck Owens moved here in the early 1950s, the oil derricks bobbing against the horizon reminded him of his home state of Texas. He wound up hitting pay dirt in a different field, playing alongside greats like Dusty Rhodes and Bakersfield native Merle Haggard, just two of the biggest names in what was already a fast-growing country music scene.

In Bakersfield today, prospects for hearing country music are still good. One of the best venues is Ethel's Old Corral Café, on the outskirts of the city. On Fridays and Sundays, its dance floor fills with couples swiveling hip to hip. Western music also packs them in at the Rockin' Rodeo, a spacious nightclub where patrons can try their luck riding a mechanical bull—or go next door for hip-hop.

Before you saddle up, check out the boots, belts, and Stetson hats at the Emporium Western Store. If shopping for antiques is more your speed, head to the Five and Dime Antique Mall in the old Woolworth's Building in historic downtown.

Bakersfield is also a city in which to grab some interesting grub. It has a number of authentic Basque restaurants, thanks to its large ethnic population. Two of the most popular dining spots are the Wool Growers Restaurant, which dishes up traditional Basque cuisine, and the Pyrenees Café, specializing in French-Basque meals. Both serve multicourse family style dinners that start with soups, salads, and house-baked breads, then move on to an assortment of grilled seafood and meat, with plenty of wine to go around. For some frontier-style sustenance, locals head to KC Steakhouse, the perfect place for carnivores with big appetites and anyone with a taste for live jazz and blues, which are piped into the dining room every night. You can follow up your T-bone with a sundae at Dewar's Candy Shop. Sit at the soda fountain and try the mint chip ice cream or pick up fudge or caramels at the candy counter. This Bakersfield fav-orite has been making all its own ice cream and candies for almost 100 years.

The city's sweetest attraction hasn't been around quite that long. But he's got that theater and that boulevard bearing his name. And on weekend evenings, in vibrant live performances, he's every bit the country music leg-end. As Buck Owens himself might sing, all he's got to do is act naturally.

If You're Going . . .

Area code is 661. Pick up AAA's *Northern California & Nevada TourBook* and *Bakersfield Area map*. Contact the **Great Bakersfield Convention and Visitors Bureau**, 515 Truxtun Ave., (866) 425-7353, www.bakersfieldcvb.org.

Eats and Sleeps

Best Western Hill House 700 Truxtun Ave., 327-4064.

Courtyard by Marriott 3601 Marriott Dr., 324-6660.

Dewar's Candy Shop 1120 Eye St., 322-0933.

Ethel's Old Corral Café 4310 Alfred Harrell Hwy., 871-4136.

Holiday Inn Select 801 Truxtun Ave., 323-1900.

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Wool Growers Restaurant 620 E. 19th St., 327-9584.

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Photography by Olivier Laude

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