



View of Mt. Signal Cafe (Mt. Signal in background)
Painting by Margaret Wilson

HE'S BASQUE, NATURALLY

Ex-Shepherd Basks In His Restaurant's Fame

By Jim Vicar, 1970

MT. SIGNAL, California — On a quiet corner on State 98, there is a cluster of faded buildings, some barking dogs, and a couple of rusting gasoline pumps.

This scene is reminiscent of wayside stops advertising "last chance to fill up for 50 miles."

Mt. Signal, named for the nearby 2,262-foot mountain, really isn't that far from the beaten track — it's only seven miles west of Calexico.

POPULAR CAFE

There is no real town here, but the largest of the group of buildings contains one of the most popular restaurants in the Imperial Valley — the Mount Signal Cafe.

It certainly isn't an imposing place. The exterior is in need of paint. The unpaved parking area is rutted and sometimes muddy. The interior is simple, with an old-fashioned mahogany bar and a collection of chairs and tables and booths of different types and sizes.

It isn't the appearance that brings people from all over Southern California to Mt. Signal. It's the Mexican food prepared by Juan Bautista Bazabal, a short, stocky gentleman born of Basque parentage in France.

FAMILY BUSINESS

The cafe is a family operation. Bazabal serves at the bar (beer and pop only) and the tables and acts as a sort of gruff, informal maitre-d'. His wife, Maria, originally from Mexico City, does most of the cooking.

Other members of the family, including the Bazabal youngsters — Filomina, 16; George, 15; Johnny, 12; and Maria Elena, 9 — help out at night and on busy weekends. Mrs. Bazabal's sister, Mrs. Esperanza Canas, helps in the kitchen.

All the usual items are sold — tacos, enchiladas, chiles rellenos, tamales, rice and frijoles — but there is something special about them. Perhaps it's the atmosphere — the patron feels like he's eating in someone's dining room instead of a restaurant.

"Families come from Niland and Calipatria — that's 30 miles from here — and spend the evening with us," Bazabal said. "Some of our customers come once a month."

San Diegans are among his regular customers, too. A few come to the valley especially to eat at Mt. Signal Cafe. Others, who are passing through en route elsewhere, detour down State 98 to eat a Bazabal meal.

BUILT RESTAURANT

Bazabal has operated the cafe 11 years. He built the restaurant on the site of a store in 1959. The site, which had been converted from a schoolhouse, burned about 1957.

Bazabal came to the valley in 1936. He farmed and herded sheep, and when he felt he was too old for that kind of work, he decided to go into the restaurant business.

His family moved to the United States in 1923, when Bazabal was 28. Before coming here, he lived in the Bishop and Bakersfield areas.