



Above: The Old California Mining Co., one of the tenants in Old California Restaurant Row in San Marcos. Left: The first market space at Old California Restaurant Row in San Marcos. Below: San Marcos Boulevard circa 1972, the site where Old California Restaurant Row would be built.

## DECADES OF DINING

Old California Restaurant Row marks 30 years with promotion

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**T**hirty years ago, about the only visitors to San Marcos Boulevard were farmers, chicken feed delivery trucks and the occasional Marine, lost on his drive between Oceanside and Escondido.

But Jim Eubank was a man with a plan.

The L.A.-based developer, who'd moved to North County in 1972 with his family — wife, Vera, and sons, Jerry and Bob — saw potential in the dusty, vacant 20-acre lot near the Sears service center at San Marcos Boulevard and a side street that he'd eventually talk the city into naming after his wife, Via Vera Cruz.

First, the Eubanks opened Rancho Mercado, a small farm stand selling local produce. Then they devised an open

food court to lure travelers off the nearby highway. And in keeping with the area's rustic charm, they called it Old California Restaurant Row. Eubank, a world-champion swimmer and one-time Navy SEAL, bulldozed the property himself. And to give the Row an authentic historical rancho look, he hauled in river rock from the Pala Indian Reservation and 100-year-old lumber and timber beams from

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purchased art and handmade tiles in Mexico. Vera Eubank recalled that envisioning her husband's dream took a lot of imagination on her part.

"San Marcos had about 15,000 residents and San Marcos Boulevard was a potholed, two-lane farming road. In the beginning, Old California Restaurant Row was surrounded by more than 20 chicken ranches and a dairy. As you might imagine, it was tough to offer 'outside' dining," she said.

Finally, Eubank hit upon the idea of building an international restaurant complex, where cuisines of all styles would be offered side by side in indoor, sit-down restaurants. The first to sign on were Gentleman's Choice, a steakhouse that lasted 23 years at the site, and two that still survive—the Bruno's Italian Restaurant and Fish House Vera Cruz.

At the time, many critics scoffed at the Restaurant Row idea, assuming the eateries would compete for the same business and struggle to survive, but Bob Eubank said his father's faith never faltered.

"Our father envisioned that this location would be very successful, due in large part that San Marcos was so centrally located — a hub if you will — between the coast and inland North County," Bob Eubank said. "The family really came together to discuss what we wanted to do with the Old California Restaurant Row. We had opened the first two restaurants ... and we decided not to be a generic strip mall with a few restaurants, but rather to build on the success we had there already and become a central location for a number of restaurants, all in one place — to become a restaurant magnet for North County. And the more restaurants we opened, the better they did."

Jim Eubank is gone now. He died in 2004 at the age of 88. But three decades on, Old California Restaurant Row is still thriving, with 16 restau-



COURTESY PHOTO

The Market St. Cafe & Bakery is one of the tenants in Old California Restaurant Row in San Marcos.

### OLD CALIFORNIA RESTAURANT ROW RESTAURANT WEEK

- **When:** Saturday through Sept. 28
- **Where:** Old California Restaurant Row, 1020 W. San Marcos Blvd., San Marcos
- **What:** Prix-fixe, three-course dinners for \$10-\$30 (reservations required)
- **Info:** [www.oldcalrestaurantrow.com](http://www.oldcalrestaurantrow.com)

rants, market shops and a 16-theater movie complex. And in honor of the development's 30-year anniversary, the Eubanks family is hosting the Row's first-ever restaurant week promotion.

Beginning Saturday and continuing through Sept. 28, all of the Row's restaurants will offer a prix-fixe, three-course dinner menu ranging in price from \$10 to \$30. Diners have three to four choices per course at each restaurant and some meals include wine, beer or coffee drinks as a course.

Some of the menu options include a \$10 meal at the Old California Coffee House (start with a feta walnut salad, choose a Greek chicken croissant entree and finish with an espresso); to \$15 at the 55 Yardline Sports Bar & Grill (start with a dozen chicken wings, then move to a Cuban sandwich with a glass of wine); to \$20 at the Maui Bistro (begin with an orchid creek shrimp roll, followed by Hana jumbo scallops and macadamia nut cheesecake); or maybe visit Friars Folly, where \$30 will buy an

appetizer of spinach artichoke feta dip, an entree of chicken marsala and chocolate lava soufflé for dessert. Complete menus are available online.

Jerry Eubank, who now makes his home in Hawaii, said he hopes Restaurant Row's first restaurant week will be a big draw. And if it's a success, it may be revived annually during anniversary month.

"Unlike other restaurant weeks, this is a great way to get a sampling of all the flavor in one location," Jerry Eubank said. "We want to share it with the community through these nine nights of dining."

When asked to pick the restaurants they'd choose during Restaurant Week, the Eubanks were diplomatic, naming something unique about all 16 outlets.

Bob Eubank said he thinks this variety, and the family's commitment to maintaining the property in first-class condition will keep Restaurant Row around for another 30 years.

"Diners continue to want great food, many choices and a reasonable price. They also

want entertainment and to have a unique dining experience," he said. "Jim Eubank understood this even back in the beginning. He could have built Old California Restaurant Row using tilt-up construction in a couple of months, but instead he decided to build the Row as an ever-evolving project using authentic building materials ... We find that diners love to come to Old California Restaurant Row and to be immersed in an Old California experience."

San Marcos Boulevard has undergone significant changes in the past few years, including the opening of several large shopping centers and a Fry's home electronics superstore. With all the new construction in the area, Jerry Eubank said Old California offers a reminder of the city's rural past.

"Dad created Old California as a labor of love, to do something special, one of a kind. Although it is always changing, we see our challenge as looking forward with upgrades and beautification to enhance the vintage feeling of the architecture and to maintain Old California as almost an historic district in the city," Jerry Eubank said.

"There may be lots of new shopping malls coming up, but there is only one Old California Restaurant Row, the heart and soul of San Marcos ... just the way Jim Eubank imagined it."