



HISTORY OF THE NORIEGA HOTEL  
BAKERSFIELD, CALIFORNIA  
America's Oldest Basque Boardinghouse  
by Steve Bass

Basque boarding houses and hotels (*ostatuak*) were a familiar sight in many of the cities and towns of the West where Basques had established a working presence. Usually located within walking distance of a train depot, these *ostatuak* became a destination point for many newly arriving Basques as they sought employment or waited for family. These establishments became a place where they could speak their unique language as well as a source of employment and socialization. They could do banking; use it as a mailing address or as a recreation center that included dances, card games and, in some cases, handball matches. The *ostatu* became a comforting extension of their far-off homes in Spain and France.

While a few *ostatu* are still scattered throughout the west, most have been lost to retirement, urban development, neglect or a changing economy. The oldest and last remaining boarding house, where meals are served family style at a single sitting, is the Noriega Hotel in Bakersfield, which has been Basque owned and/or operated since 1893.

The story of the Noriega begins with Faustino Mier from Santander, Spain and Fernando Etcheverry from Aldudes, Basse-Pyrenees, France. Faustino came to California by way of New York and then the Isthmus of Panama. He reached San Francisco on October 4, 1872, two weeks shy of his sixteenth birthday. He went to work for his uncle and godfather, Vincente Noriega, in Tulare, California as a shepherd. In 1879 he began

tending sheep for Haggin and Tevis, owners of the Kern County Land Company, who had extensive holdings in the San Joaquin Valley. In 1882 he was hired as foreman for the Miller and Lux sheep operations. Miller and Lux was another giant land, livestock and agricultural enterprise in early Kern County. In 1893 Mier, who by this time had adopted his uncle's surname of Noriega, married Basque Louise Inda.

Fernando Etcheverry came to the U.S. in 1885 to herd sheep for two aunts near Los Banos, Mrs. Peter Gastambide and Mrs. Domingo Gastambide. In 1890 he relocated to Bakersfield and went into the sheep business for himself. He made his headquarters first in the Poso Creek area north of town and then moved into Kern, now East Bakersfield. In 1893, Etcheverry and Noriega became business partners. In that year, with a loan of \$3,500, the duo opened the Iberia Hotel on Sumner Street, one block from the Southern Pacific railroad station.

The hotel was a two-story wooden structure with a wood-walled handball court running east to west on its south side and a stable and livery business on its west side. Purposely located near the railroad depot, the hotel soon became the first home in America for many immigrating Basques and the focal point of Basque activities in the county. The proximity to the train station was important as many immigrants arrived in Bakersfield from the New York with a note on their lapel or coat that stated simply, "Noriega Hotel--Bakersfield, California."

In 1900 Etcheverry and Noriega began branching out with their investments, some together and some on their own. In 1901, with a loan of \$9,000, they built the Pyrenees Hotel, also on Sumner Street, less than a block east of the Iberia and even closer to the railroad depot. The Pyrenees was a substantial two-story masonry structure, safer from fire threats.

During the years 1893 to 1901, the Noriega family lived at the Noriega, as did Etcheverry. In 1901 Noriega and Etcheverry began leasing out their two hotels to pay off their loans. During that year the Noriega's moved out of the hotel and built a fine house about one half mile north of Sumner Street on Baker Street where it still stands. In 1902, Fernando Etcheverry married Mathilda Etcheverry. (There were several different Etcheverry families in Kern at the time.)

From 1901 to 1906, Jean Burubeltz and his wife leased the Noriega. Burubeltz is believed to have been one of the first permanent Basque residents of Kern County, arriving in 1873 from Lasse, Basse-Pyrenees. He was in the sheep business in the area until 1890 when he liquidated his livestock interests and relocated to Los Angeles where he went into the hotel business with Pascal Ballade. There he married Jeanne Erreca, also in 1890. Burubeltz heard that Noriega was looking for someone to run his hotel and he and his wife returned to Bakersfield to manage the Faustino's hotel. In 1906 Burubeltz moved again to operate the Hotel d' Europe, also known as the Europa. It was located less than a block east of the Noriega and only a few houses east of the Pyrenees. Burubeltz died in 1911.

In 1906 while still in partnership with Etcheverry, Noriega changed the name of the Iberia to the Noriega Hotel. Etcheverry sold his interest in the two hotels to Noriega several years later and began concentrating his energies on a ranch he had purchased west of town. When Burubeltz left the hotel in 1906, records are scarce on who operated the business for the next decade or so. According to *ostatu* historian Jeronima Echeverria, a Spaniard named Fernandes-Aja managed the hotel from 1915 to 1920.

In 1904 Francisco (Frank) Amestoy arrived in Los Angeles from Navarra, Spain by way of the Philippines where he worked in the sugar cane fields with his older brothers. Later he came to Bakersfield and was hired by Noriega to work at the Hotel. There he met Anselma "Txaparita" Ballaz when she was hired as a maid in 1912. They were married the same year. In 1920 the Amestoy's took over management of the hotel. In 1927 they purchased the Cesmat Hotel on Humboldt Street (now East 21<sup>st</sup> Street) one block south and east of the Noriega. They continued to run the Noriega until January of 1931 when they moved to the Cesmat and renamed it the Amestoy. When the Amestoy's moved, Faustino's daughter, Marcelina Noriega Recatune, and her husband managed the hotel for a short time. Later in 1931 Jean and Grace Elizalde took over the hotel and their decedents continue to operate it to this day.

Jean Elizalde came to Bakersfield from Anhau, France in 1905. He was sponsored in his immigration by Jean Burubeltz and worked as a sheepherder. He herded for various employers and then purchased his own flock. Gracianne "Grace" Laporte was also born in Anhau and came to Tehachapi, Kern County, in 1914. Shortly thereafter, while working for family friend Jacques Iriart at the Franco-American Hotel, she met Elizalde and they were married.

The couple lived in various locations while with the sheep and, after they lost their animals during the Depression, they went into the hotel business. At first they leased the New Commercial Hotel east of Baker Street on Sumner, directly south across the street from the Southern Pacific depot. Then, as mentioned, the Elizalde's took over the Noriega in 1931. During her tenure at the hotel, Grace became the unofficial godmother to any Basque in the area that might require help. She became known as "Mama Elizalde" and would share her time and resources with anyone she felt needy. Her unselfish devotion to the welfare of those not as fortunate became legendary. She took care of the Basque herders by being their interpreter, arranging medical or other appointments and tending to any of dozens of other needs that might arise.

Jean died in 1933 and Grace continued to operate the hotel, later with the aid of her sons Albert and Louie. In 1964 Grace convinced Bernadette Etcheverry Irigoyen to leave her hotel job in San Francisco and came to work at the hotel as a cook and waitress. After fifty years, she is still the backbone of the kitchen. Grace passed away in 1974 and the sons continued the day-to-day management of the hotel. When Louie died, his wife Janice then ran the hotel with her brother-in-law, Albert. When Albert passed away, Janice was assisted by two of her daughters, Rochelle and Linda. Louie and Janice had two other daughters, Grace and Cindy.

Since Janice died, Rochelle Elizalde Ladd and Linda Elizalde McCoy maintain the operation of the hotel and, through their efforts, the Noriega has now been in the Elizalde family for over 80 years. It remains a Bakersfield and national landmark. On May 9, 2011 at the Lincoln Center in New York City, the James Beard Foundation presented the Noriega Hotel with the very prestigious American Classic Award for their dining room. This award "...recognizes the nation's beloved regional restaurants. Distinguished by their timeless appeal, they serve quality food that reflects the character of their communities." This is the first and only such award presented to a Basque establishment in the United States. The Noriega Hotel's importance to the Kern County Basque community, and to Bakersfield, has been and is, valuable and unique.

In 1998, Grace Laporte Elizalde was posthumously inducted into the Basque Hall of Fame in New York City.

Photo of the hotel circa 1907:

The women on the balcony, although indistinguishable, are identified as: L to R, Manuela Argain, Marianna Irouleguy Ansolabehere, Matilda Etcheverry (Fernando's wife) with son Felix, barely visible, and Jeanne Etcheverry Echenique. The gentleman on the far right is Faustino Noriega.





Fernando and Mathilda Etcheverry, 1902





**A gauche, Léopold Monlong agent d'émigration  
en visite dans la famille Saldubéhère (Etxemendia)**

Grace Laporte Elizalde in light dress in center. Photo circa 1950 in front of Noriega Hotel with the old swinging doors barely visible.



1954	Jean Batista	Bidigam	Paio 85
1954	Gliseo	aga	14. 17 avul
1945	Daniel	Legaraga	28 avul
1945	antonena	Pito Paio	85 Mo
1954	Rubio Seselia	Saiz	Paio 85 1
1954	Etchecopar	Jean Batista	30 Apr <sup>lega falta</sup>
1954	Puen	Etchebarn	28 apr
1954	andre	Etchebarn	haja perjo
1954	Daniel	Legaraga	May 6 Paio
1954	Puen	Sarassola	Paio

Partial photo of a page of the Noriega Hotel Registry from 1954.

Current owners of the hotel posing with their James Beard Award. Linda McCoy on left and Rochelle Ladd holding medal.





The hotel today: Hotel rooms are on the left, bar and dining room in the center and front wall of the handball court on the right. Currently there are four boarders.





The dining room: Dinner is served at 7:00 pm Tuesday through Sunday.



The family-friendly bar where everyone waits for meal call: Lunch at noon.



The “newer” handball court that replaced the wooden one. Because the Kern County Basque Club has built a regulation court, children hitting a tennis ball or kicking a soccer ball now are the only ball players to use this court.