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Beach Street: Cafe is a slice of workaday life

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WATSONVILLE — There are no frills at Beach Street.

At the unpretentious cafe in the middle of Watsonville's west side agribusiness district, \$2.70 will get you two eggs over easy, hash browns, toast and coffee. Meals are served up on a long, formica counter and spartan tables under an open-beam ceiling. There are no curtains on the windows, no paper on the walls. About the only gestures to interior decorating are some Dodgers and Giants pennants and 225 baseball caps emblazoned with company logos which ring the restaurant at the juncture of the walls and the ceiling.

"People give them to me," explained Paul Begley, chef and co-owner, "or I trade breakfasts for them sometimes."

It's fitting that the cafe is simply known as "Beach Street," because the plain, squat, 45-year-old frame building which formerly housed a Mexican restaurant is a slice of workaday life in Watsonville's shed district; a crossroads for the people who make this town on the banks of the Pajaro River the bustling economic center that it is.

Beach Street is packed with working people from the moment it opens its doors at 6 each morning. And a lot of the breakfast customers, according to waitress Cathy Betti, are regulars who come back for lunch.

"This is really the only place to come," she said.

"It's just a real friendly place, a workingman's place," said Aptos resident Ed Imlay, 45. Owner of the Better Egg Co., which distributes eggs and specialty food items to hotels and restaurants from Santa Cruz to Monterey, Imlay said he eats breakfast at Beach Street regularly. "You don't have to put on any airs to come in here," said the beefy man with graying muttonchop whiskers and sideburns.

Beach Street, said Imlay, is a democratic place. "You get a real social mix here," he said. "You get average working people sitting down next to millionaire grower-shippers."

"You get the apple growers, the berry growers, the guys with the fertilizers, the shippers — you get 'em all here," said Alan Ishibashi, 54. Ishibashi, who works for a strawberry processor, meets regularly at Beach Street with several other men for coffee.

When Ishibashi and his companions sit down for their morning get-together, the talk, befitting a workingman's place, is of work. If not that, then the weather.

Ted Bruce, a 35-year-old roofing contractor, is a Beach Street regular.

"I've been coming in for breakfast ever since they opened; if I'm in town, I'm here," said Bruce, who grew up in Soquel and moved to the Watsonville area after

returning from the Midwest, where he attended school for several years at the University of Kansas before going into the roofing business. Bruce said he was two semesters away from a degree in accounting when he dropped out of school.

"I won't go back to school," he said. "I'm a construction worker at heart; I like the outside."

Bruce was asked why he likes coming to Beach Street for breakfast every day.

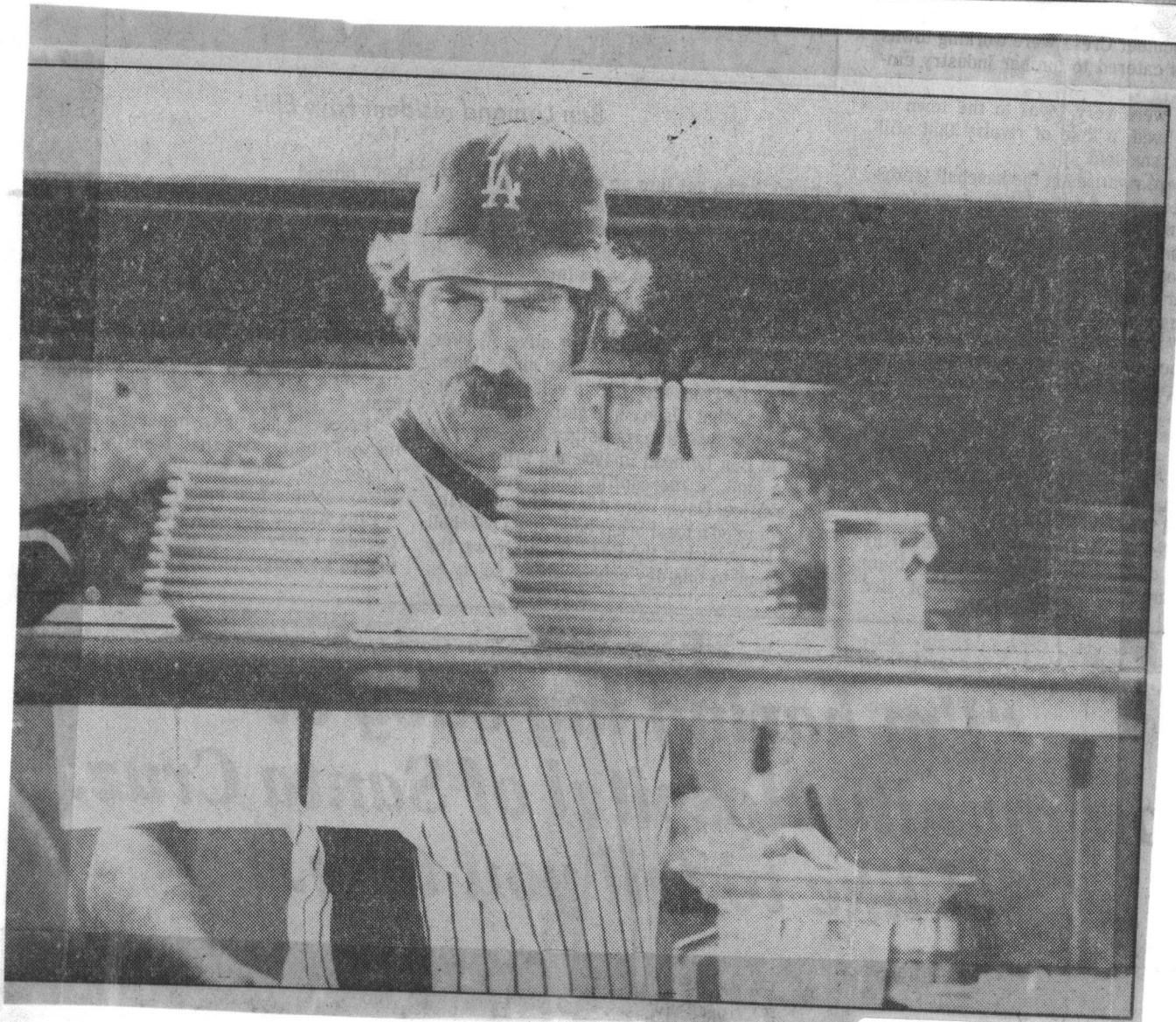
No mystery to that, Bruce indicated, with a nod toward Begley in the kitchen. "Pablo's a good cook." "When you write this," said Begley, in between tending to eggs and flapjacks on the sizzling griddle in the narrow galley kitchen, "it's 'Beach Street,' not 'Beach Street Cafe.'"

Begley doesn't want the eating establishment he owns with partner Jeff Hansen confused with the restaurant across from the Coconut Grove in Santa Cruz. Except for the similarity in names, it would be tough to get the two mixed up — about as tough as mistaking Beach Street's no-nonsense setting of warehouses and sheds for the Beach Boardwalk or Watsonville for Santa Cruz.

"Watsonville and Santa Cruz," said Begley, who lives in the latter town, "are like night and day."

"It's a little more 'country' here; it's more down-to-earth."

"People here are a little more real."



It's hard to find a seat at Beach Street, even at 6:45 in the morning. Diners partake of their morning repast under a border of hats and pennants. Millionaire growers sit next to farm hands in this slice of workaday life. Below, chef Paul Begley whips up breakfast.

