

# POINT REYES LIGHT

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Sally Gale owns Chileno Valley Ranch with her husband Mike. She puts great value in the land, which has been in her family for generations, and works to restore it while running a successful business. Photo by Gwen Meyer.

## Vladimir Nevl, 1930 to 2008

by **Jacoba Charles**

Vladimir Nevl, the avid skier, horseman and charismatic owner of Vladimir's Czech Restaurant in Inverness, passed away on Monday. He was 77.

"He's touched the hearts of so many people," said his daughter Vladya Brooks. "Love of people and life has always been very strong in him."

"He was a joy," said his wife, Alena Nevl. "A delightful man."

Vladimir was born on October 20, 1930 in a village in the Moravian region of the former Czechoslovakia. He graduated from a hotel school in Zlin, and in 1948 escaped the communist coup by ski-

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## Scuffle over oyster trip

by **Jacoba Charles**

A barge tour of Drakes Estero scheduled for this Friday is the latest installment in the ongoing controversy between the Point Reyes National Seashore and Drakes Bay Oyster Company.

The trip is part of a two-day public workshop that is kicking off a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) panel review of the science used by the park when assessing the oyster farm's environmental impacts on Drakes Estero. The NAS review follows on the heels of an investigation into allegations of unfair treatment and scientific misconduct by the park.

A tour of the estero was requested two weeks ago by NAS board director Susan

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## Old-fashioned in Chileno

by **Molly Birnbaum**

Sally Gale moved into the large, ramshackle ranch house on Chileno Valley Road with her husband Mike in the fall of 1993. She had left her job as a pediatric social worker and a home in Hawaii where she raised her children to enter the world of rolling pastures and tumbledown barns that had been in her family for generations. She and Mike began a five-year renovation and emerged with a successful ranching business.

"It was an adventure," said Sally, sitting at her kitchen table on Sunday with a mug of tea laced with honey and mint. "One

huge adventure."

Today Sally and Mike, who met after they served in the Peace Corps, raise and sell grass-fed beef, organic tomatoes and 20 varieties of apples, which anyone can pick on Sunday afternoons. Their meat, which is generally purchased by individuals and families, is available by the split-quarter, half, or whole. A quarter runs for around \$380.

"We don't sell wholesale; there is no middleman," Sally said. "There are no feed lots and no transportation. It's very old fashioned."

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# >> Vladimir

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ing into Bavaria, according to a 1992 interview with the Prague Post.

Vladimir's stories were mercurial and changed from telling to telling; many describe him as a private person who didn't much like to talk about himself. After leaving Czechoslovakia, he may have spent time in German refugee camps; he may have been a cook there. He may also have spent a year in the wine schools of the Bordeaux region of France.

In his early 20s, he signed a contract with a road crew and moved to Australia, where he worked as a cook. "I had to hunt and kill each meal myself," Vladimir told the Post.

He stayed on in Sydney for several years, working in restaurants and riding horses before taking a boat to San Francisco.

"The county and people were great, but the climate's too hot for a European," he said. Vladimir became an American citizen, and felt deeply patriotic about his new country. "He loved the chance to start his life over," Vladya said.

He met his wife Alena in 1958 while working at Ernie's in San Francisco.

"He comes in with a bunch of roses," Alena said during an interview at their home on Wednesday afternoon. "He had a date with the Gallo salami daughter, but she got angry and left because he was late."

Instead, he talked with Alana, a dietary intern at UCSF, who was there having dinner with some friends. The two married and followed her parents to Inverness.

"He never thought of leaving," Alena said. "He came from a small village and we still live in a small village."

The restaurant opened around 1960, shortly after they moved. "First he bought the little restaurant there on the corner that is now run by Strom Electric," said his longtime friend Cecil Asman. "But that didn't work too well, so he ended up buying what became Vladimir's."

First it was called the Moravian, but people thought it was Russian. "We called it the Czechoslovakian for a couple of years, but that was too much of a mouthful for some folks," Vladimir told the Post. "By that time they all knew me anyway, so for almost 30 years it's been Vladimir's."

The restaurant was truly a labor of love. Vladimir would arrive early and work until late in the night.

"He was always either cooking, or giving people a bad time," Vladya said. "The restaurant was my dad inside and out. It was his passion, his joy, his hardship."

Vladimir's restaurant is a dark-wooded, cozy place. The walls are a collage of



**Vladimir Nevl's menu** did not change during the 48 years he ran his restaurant in Inverness, said his daughter Vladya Brooks. Duck, dumplings and apple strudel were served with pilsners and Bekerovka. Photo courtesy of Art Rogers/ Point Reyes.

its owner's past: there are photographs of him as a young man on skis and on horseback, on foxhunts in Nicasio. Paintings of horseback riders and folksy Czech artifacts are sprinkled throughout.

Czech folk music often played on the stereo, while Vladimir served guests or filled enormous steins of pilsner for tourists from his two-handled brass beer tap. But regulars would just go behind the bar and help themselves, Cecil noted.

Vladimir was sharp if unconventional in his attire. He always wore riding boots, and sometimes riding pants and a crop. He also could often be seen in brightly colored traditional Czech shirts with ribbons and embroidery.

"He was such a spiffy dresser," Vladya said. "He loved beautiful clothes, and to look his best. He wore cufflinks a lot, which you don't hear about now, and bowties and tie pins."

Vladimir's restaurant was his kingdom, and in it he was known both for his generosity and his strong opinions. Some guests have stories of being welcomed into the bar as if it were a living room; but they also had to accept his quirks.

As a staunch Republican in a land of Democrats, Vladimir sometimes foisted his conservative views on his customers. Matt Gallagher describes going into the bar when he was 21 with some friends, one of whom had long hair.

"You look like a girlie-man," Vladimir told him, and the friends all laughed.

After repeating the description several times, Vladimir said "I can fix that," pulling a pair of scissors from behind the counter and clipping a clump from the young man's shoulder-length hair.

He is described in the Post as flicking his riding crop at an affectionate couple, first commanding them to "behave themselves," and then asking, "You married?" Snapping his riding crop was not uncommon, Cecil said. Sometimes he would do it to children too, as a joke, reminding them to eat their meals like their parents told them to.

In addition to the restaurant, Vladimir loved playing, listening to and reading music, as well as skiing and riding his horses. He was passionate about dressage, but also liked to jump and explore the landscape of West Marin.

"He was known to ride all over the hills before he became ill," Cecil said. "There are a lot of trails up in the park where you can ride and look out over the ocean and through the woods."

Vladimir and Alena owned a 12-acre parcel of land on the north end of Inverness. "There are two creeks and a forest," Alena said. "He planted all kinds of trees. He loved to garden. The apples for the restaurant came from there."

He built a stable, where he would sometimes keep two or three horses. In the valley was a little riding ring.

"I can remember the first time I saw his face turn as white as a white shirt,"

Cecil said. "It was when he was teaching me to ride. My horse was up in the air and decided not to do the jump. I can still see his mouth wide open, gasping, as I came down on the bars. I got up and kept going but it's funny how you remember things like that."

In December, Vladimir's horse Happy Boy passed away around the same time that his health took a turn for the worse. "He took it very hard," Vladya said. "He had a very special connection with horses, and as things started slowing down a little bit the horse was there as a companion."

Vladimir continued spending time in the restaurant, even after Vladya flew down from her home in Oregon to run it. He had a reclining chair in a back room where he could watch television. He passed away there in his restaurant, in his daughter's arms, as Labor Day drew to a close.

"He never complained," Vladya said. "He went to the very end with grace and pride and compassion."

*Vladimir is survived by his wife, Alena Nevl; his son Alan Nevl and his wife Mieko; his daughter Vladya Brooks and her husband Michael; his sister-in-law Judy Prokupek; his two nephews Robert and Richard Prokupek; and his niece Sandy Costello. A celebration is being planned in his honor.*