

Mom and son carry on Czech tradition at Vladimir's



Alex Smith, son of Vladia Brooks, daughter of Valadimir Nevl, are behind the scenes at Vladimir's Czech Restaurant in Inverness. The mother and son duo continue to cook authentic Czech dishes like sweet and sour cabbage, potato salad, apple strudel, veal schnitzel—and don't forget the Becherovka. Photos by Sasha Portis.

COASTAL COOK BY SASHA PORTIS

Vladia Brooks kneads bread in the same spot that her father, Vladimir Nevl, kneaded bread for almost 50 years. The Czech restaurant opened in Inverness in 1960 and for decades people came for Becherovka, a bowl of soup or sauerkraut with a chilled mug of pilsner. When Vladimir passed away last September, Vladia stepped in.

Vladia, now 47, grew up in her father's kitchen. Since she was tall enough to reach the counter she was doing dishes, folding napkins, carving the butter into curly cues and setting tables. In her early teens, she started mixing bread dough and chopping vegetables for gulash. These tasks are now the job of Vladia's 23-year-old son, Alex.

On Tuesday, Vladia prepared a sweet and sour red cabbage side dish, a Czech staple served hot. Alex stood in the kitchen wearing his grandfather's traditional Czech shirt and handmade belt, and a scarf around his neck emblazoned with the Moravian family crest. He had arrived a bit disheveled and sleepy on his Suzuki motorcycle. The smells of browning onions gradually woke him up as he followed his mother's orders: grab the milk, scoop the flour into the mixer, et cetera.

"I hate when she does the dishes. She did them all her life," he said. Alex does most of the dishes and food prep, and makes a fine veal schnitzel.

Vladia doesn't use exact measurements because after years of making the same dishes, a sixth sense of measurement develops. "You do it by taste," Vladia said. "You don't have to be very particular."

She began by sautéing thinly sliced onions in a large vat. She added an equal amount of cored, peeled and thinly sliced

apples, caraway seeds, kosher salt and ground pepper. In another corner of the kitchen she started the bread. Vladia then pulled out a bowl of red-wheat and rye hearts for Vladimir's signature rye loaves. The hearty hearts must be steamed before adding them to warmed milk with a chunk of fresh yeast and a bit of sugar, which activates the yeast.

Vladia went back to the vat while the yeast mix sat. Once the onions were clear and the apples soft, Vladia turned the heat down to a low simmer and added a box of brown sugar—the sweet—and some balsamic vinegar—the sour. To cook a household serving, Vladia suggests a tablespoon of balsamic vinegar and a bit more brown sugar. Next, she piled in three times as much thinly chopped purple cabbage as the onions and apples combined.

The smell of fruit and caraway enveloped the room. Alex and Vladia switched from one task to another without looking at the clock or bumping into each other.

Vladimir spent the last days of his life in the back room of his bar. Towards the end, he would sit watching his family work in the kitchen, chopping celery with his old Japanese knives and filling his dented bread pans with bulbous loaves. He would hold a full martini glass of Becherovka, for old times sake, even though he wasn't drinking anymore. Vladia remembers how he would right the glass just as it was about to spill into his lap.

Growing up, the Nevls ate at least one Czech meal a day. These recipes are ingrained in her. Vladia returned to Inverness two years ago after three decades in Portland where she worked as a diet technician in hospitals. "The last thing I wanted to do was run a restaurant," she said. "But I didn't want to see it just go away."

Neither did the locals. They wanted it to stay exactly the way it was, complete with the equestrian paintings. People still stop in to say hello to Vladimir. When Vladia tells these loyal customers he has passed away, they either cry or ask for a shot.



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