

# Caterer's wild times take her from Hollywood to kitchen

■ Van Slyke has few regrets about leaving the limelight for her catering business in Walnut Creek

By Deborah Burstyn  
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When F Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "There are no second acts in American lives," he clearly hadn't anticipated Sally Van Slyke.

Her Wild Thyme Catering Company may be under the freeway between Walnut Creek and Lafayette but to Sally, it's over the rainbow: her happy-ever-after and exactly where she wants to be after bringing down the curtain on her own wild time.

At the top of her game as a major Hollywood power player, Van Slyke got up and walked away 11 years ago.

After a brief stopover in Washington D.C., she decided to come home.

A native of Berkeley and a UC Berkeley grad, that meant the Bay Area.

With her fearless aplomb, she picked up a Stanford MBA and then spent six months in Diablo Valley College's restaurant program. Then she took on cooking for the California Shakespeare Company in Orinda.

Today Van Slyke and her husband, Gene Filson, run Wild Thyme catering company and pamper their clients with their homegrown herbs and tomatoes. Van Slyke couldn't be happier.

"In Hollywood you're either on your way up or on your way down," she said. "I decided to quit while I was ahead."

It had been a dazzling ride, turbo-charged by some of the biggest names in the business.

First plucked from obscurity by "All in the Family" creator Norman Lear, who promoted her from studio page to public relations powerhouse, Van Slyke ultimately rose to become head of marketing for Universal Studios under Lew Wasserman, with stops in between promoting "Dynasty" and "Miami Vice" for Aaron Spelling and the "Back to the Future" trilogy for Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment.

But after 30 years, the stars had lost their glitter.

Van Slyke wasn't bitter. In fact, even though literary agents continue to beg her to write a Hollywood tell-all, she won't.

"I don't want to be evil," she shrugs. Instead she's working on a book about her life as a caterer aptly called, "Wild Thymes."

Although when pressed she won't tell on who's been naughty but she will applaud those who were nice.

"Paul Newman would be the best example," she recalled. Goldie Hawn is another star who rates favorably in Van Slyke's memories of Hollywood personalities.

She also looks back with pride on some of her own accomplishments during her tinsel town

tenure.

"Fried Green Tomatoes" is a film I am still proud of because it was all about different kinds of love ... a very sweet film from a lovely director by the name of Jon Avnet starring Jessica Tandy, Kathy Bates and Mary Louis Parker.

"As for TV — well Dynasty started the women over 40 can be sex symbols thing — and the marketing campaigns were, if I say so myself, great. 'Miami Vice' changed the 'look' of television so that was interesting, too."

More interesting perhaps than fussing over tapenades and kebabs for Contra Costa County events?

Not to Van Slyke.

"We catered the joint 80th birthday dinner for a couple — and two years later their 60th wedding anniversary when they renewed their vows.

Just this week he came in to arrange for her memorial — and we had a cry together. I meet wonderful people in this business at very important moments of their ever-so-human real lives."

Van Slyke runs a hand through her red hair and her gaze wanders towards the back room where rows of votive holders, stacks of folded napkins and table cloths and shelves of centerpieces await the next round of catered events.

Her chef, clad in white, awaits her approval of the weekend's menus.

Her husband waves papers that he needs her to review and



SALLY VAN SLYKE stands in the kitchen of her catering business, Wild Thyme Catering, in Walnut Creek. Van Slyke is a resident of Lafayette who was a Hollywood powerhouse in the Lou Wasserman/Aaron Spelling era.

sign. She smiles.

"I have had a fabulous life. No doubt about it and I worked my rear off to have it — 24/7 in Hollywood for years.

"But there are many definitions of success and I was missing the home and family part.

"When I left Hollywood it was time. It is a young business for women — actually for men,

too, and I was not young anymore. I wanted to walk out on top — not just fade away.

"Of course, truth be told, I need to go to New York at least three times a year to get my big city fix.

"And I'm a lifetime member of the Motion Picture Academy so I still vote on the Oscars which keeps me 'in the know.'

"I also love to go to Tuscany. That's where I get new ideas for my clients plus I have a great time.

"I have a supportive husband who makes me laugh, lots of pe animals and a beautiful garden. A nice second life. Hollywood was very very good to me. I do not have to work — I just love what I do."