

# ARMEN BALIANTZ 1921-2007 / Joyful owner of Bali's restaurant, warm-hearted friend of the great

<https://www.sfgate.com/restaurants/article/ARMEN-BALIANTZ-1921-2007-Joyful-owner-of-Bali-s-2549513.php#photo-2687792>

**Steven Winn, Chronicle Arts and Culture Critic**  
**Published 4:00 am PDT, Saturday, August 4, 2007**

She took Rudolf Nureyev under her wing when he defected from the Soviet Union in 1961. She pulled the strings that got fellow ballet superstar and defector Mikhail Baryshnikov his California's driver's license. She befriended filmmakers and street people, novelists and politicians, and whisked them all together as if fame and social distinctions were meaningless. And she made a memorable rack of lamb marinated in pomegranate juice.

Armen Balianz, the child of Armenian refugees who endured four years of internment in China and later turned San Francisco restaurant ownership into a joyous social art form at the eponymous Bali's, died of natural causes Thursday night at St. Mary's Hospital.

Armen Bali, or Madam Bali, as she was widely known, was 86 and had been ill for some time. But as people remembered her on Friday, it was as if her transformative and magnanimous spirit couldn't possibly be extinguished.

Her legacy, several of them said, shines on most clearly in her daughter Jeannette Etheredge, owner and proprietor of the famed Tosca Cafe in North Beach. There, from one generation to the next, runs a vein of San Francisco society that marries glamour and celebrity to the cohesive warmth of village life grounded in open-hearted hospitality, family and food. Bali's closed in 1985. But the long nights filled with laughter, friendship, Russian vodka and that inevitable rack of lamb live on.

"She was a very strong and opinionated woman with a very soft heart," Baryshnikov said by telephone. "She was a controlled Bohemian who loved people and was also a very good businesswoman."

"I can see her holding court in at that corner table," film director Philip Kaufman said of Balianz, "reading people's fortunes in their coffee grounds. She was very bright and a big reader, always talking about Russian novels. She had a great sense of humor. I thought she was very sexy. You could let your hair down with Armen; there was this innate naturalness about her."

"Everyone fell in love with her," said "Beach Blanket Babylon" producer Jo Schuman Silver. "Men, women, everyone wanted to be in her presence."

"She had a great huge heart," said San Francisco Ballet master Betsy Erickson, who attended parties for dancers at Bali's in the 1970s and 1980s. "She always had a hug

and a big smile for everyone."

Balianz's generosity extended to money, material goods, even the clothes off her back. After one trip to Russia, Etheredge recalled, her mother was riding with Nureyev in a Paris taxicab and sweating in the heat. When Nureyev suggested she take off her coat, Balianz refused. "It turns out," Etheredge said, "that she had given away the last of her underwear to the maid in the airport bathroom."

Etheredge said her mother "was the kind of person that everybody she met became friends with her. And she never lost those friendships." While Russian dancers always held a special place, friendships could come from almost anywhere. Her social spiral included labor leader Harry Bridges, sculptor Benny Bufano, Chronicle columnist Herb Caen, California Assembly Speaker and later San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, and writer William Saroyan. Balianz introduced the dancer Natalia Makarova, another Soviet defector, to her future husband, Edward Karkar.

"I will always be grateful to her for that," Makarova said in a statement. She praised her friend of 35 years for her generosity, kindness and joie de vivre.

"She was the most feminine, charming woman of exceptional beauty. She never looked her age."

Schuman Silver was at a party Balianz threw for her own doctors about 10 years ago. "She had a doctor for every organ," Schuman Silver recalled, "and they were all there. It was hysterical. They were all discussing her like she was this specimen. But you know something? It was a great, great party."

Armen Psakian was born on Jan. 9, 1921, to Armenian parents who had fled to Russia and then to China after the 1915-1917 massacres by the Turks. She spent her early years in Harbin, Manchuria; her father was a journalist for a French Armenian-language newspaper. Growing up, Armen spoke Armenian, Russian and Mandarin. She married Aram Balianz, who was in the import-export business in Tsingtao, in 1939, and their two children, Jeannette and Arthur, were born in the 1940s.

The family was held in a prison camp by the Japanese for four years during the war. Balianz, who learned English and French during that time, spoke about experiences in China in Peter Kaufman's 1994 documentary "China: The Wild East." She remained friends for life with one of the paratroopers who liberated the camp.

After the war, the Balianz family worked in a Tsingtao confectionary business. The United States had tightened restrictions on immigration from Communist countries, so the family left China and spent two years in a refugee camp in the Philippines. They finally arrived in San

Francisco in 1952. At the time, Balianz said that although she had an emerald ring on her hand, the only cash she and her husband had to their names was a 50-cent piece: She tossed it into the bay as their ship passed under the Golden Gate Bridge. Armen and Aram Balianz divorced in 1959.

Using the emerald ring as collateral for a bank loan, Balianz opened the original Bali's on Sansome Street in the early 1950s, and Bufano became her first celebrity customer. The restaurant moved to Pacific and Battery in the mid-1970s and was a success from the start.

"There were some up-and-down years," said Etheredge of her mother's business, "but it always made money. And she always had friends to help her out when times got a little tough."

When her son Arthur was killed in a motorcycle accident in 1983, Balianz decided to close the restaurant. Two years later, she did. Devastated as she was by the loss of her son, Balianz remained, characteristically, both tough and warmhearted. Etheredge remembered her mother saying of a psychiatrist who was supposed to help her with the grieving, "He's got problems." Later she

taught the psychiatrist how to cook her signature rack of lamb. She was a fixture at Tosca's in her retirement years.

"The flip side of Armen was that she didn't suffer fools," Kaufman said. "She was very opinionated."

As Baryshnikov says of her in a forthcoming book, "she was exotic and straightforward and loud and streetsmart."

In addition to her daughter, Balianz is survived by her daughter-in-law, Genevieve Balianz, and grandchildren Peter Balianz, Devin Etheredge, Eric Balianz and Zoe Balianz, all of San Francisco. Balianz, who requested that she have no funeral, will be remembered in a memorial service at Tosca on Jan. 9, 2008. That would have been her 87th birthday.

The family requests that donations in her honor be made to the St. Mary's Foundation at St. Mary's Hospital, 450 Stanyan St., San Francisco, CA 94117.

#



Chronicle / Michael Maloney, file



Chronicle / Vince Maggiora, file

Feb. 25, 1985 photo of Armen Bali (standing) and Mikhail Barishnikov. Chronicle File Photo/Michael Maloney

Feb. 23, 1979 Chronicle photo of Armen Bali (L) and Rudolf Nureyev. Chronicle File photo/ Vince Maggiora