



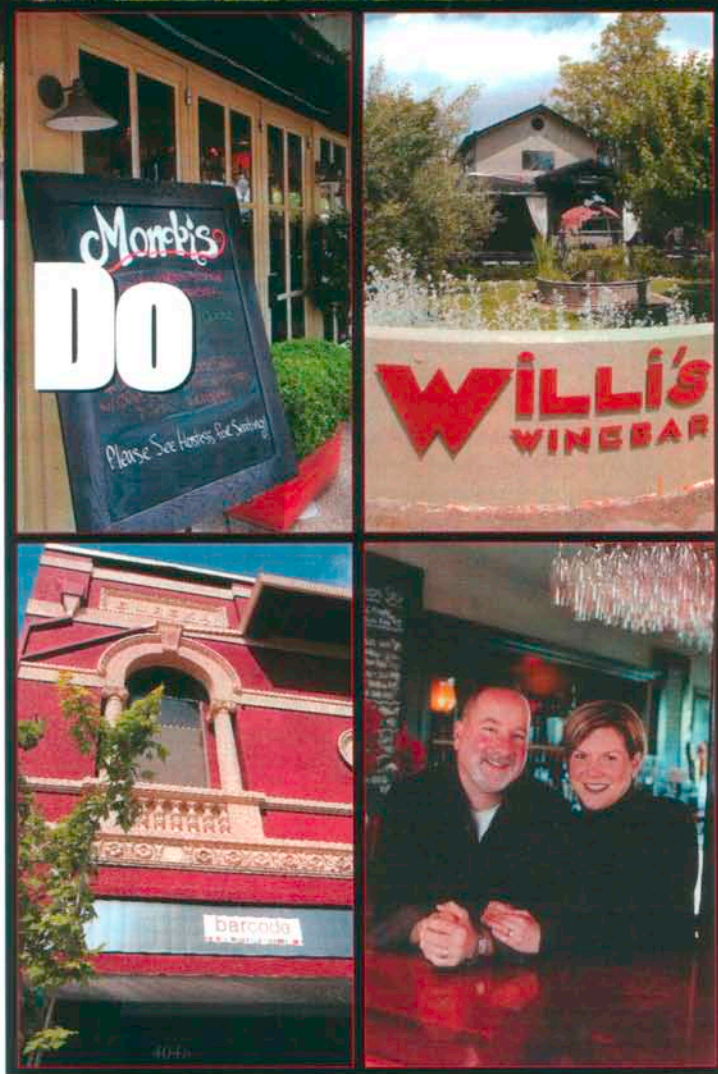
What Willi Do

WHEN IT COMES TO DOING THINGS WELL, WILLI'S WINE BAR OWNERS MARK AND TERRI STARK ARE A STEP AHEAD OF THE GAME.

By Katherine Merrill

Do what you love and the money will follow. Is that the best advice you ever received or the worst? For Mark and Terri Stark, following their passion has placed them squarely on the fast track to success. They opened their first eatery, Willi's Wine Bar, in the fall of 2002, followed by Willi's Seafood & Raw Bar a year later, Monti's Rotisserie in the summer of 2004 and the trendy watering hole Barcode in the fall of 2005. All are in Santa Rosa except Willi's Seafood & Raw Bar in Healdsburg. Santa Rosa will also be home to a traditional-style steakhouse slated to open in Railroad Square in October, providing the building's retrofitting stays on schedule.

Top of page: Willi's Seafood & Raw Bar; Clockwise from bottom right: Owners Mark and Terri Stark; Barcode Exterior; Monti's Rotisserie entrance; and Willi's Wine Bar exterior. (Duncan Garrett Photography)



she started dating Mark. He saw the poster and thought it was a great name for a place someday (it helped that his father's family nickname was "Uncle Willy," and he was also known as "Willy" in the Marine Corp.). The poster traveled with them for years.

Shortly before Willi's opened, and before they announced the name, Terri was in the office of a friend who had recently returned from Paris. "I looked down on his desk, and he had a Willi's Wine Bar menu," she says. He had brought it back for Mark. Terri called Mark. "So get this, Willi's Wine Bar exists in Paris, and it's been there for 25 years or something," she told him. "I got home, and I looked at that poster that I've been moving around since I was 22 years old, and I look along the bottom and there it is, the address in Paris where Willi's Wine Bar is. And it was literally only four months before we opened the wine bar."

"And we just said, eh, there's enough space between us. They won't mind," says Mark, shrugging his



shoulders. "Everybody brings us back stuff. We have so many postcards and posters now." The owner of the Paris location has even visited the Santa Rosa bar although the Starks have yet to hit the Paris spot.

The Starks claim Willi's was the first to bring tapas-style eating to Santa Rosa's restaurant scene. "We did feel the concept for the wine bar—the international small plates—wasn't happening up here yet," says Terri. But not everyone understood the concept of serving up small plates of food.

"We went out knocking on doors looking for money, and we got a lot of feedback: 'So, you're going to open a topless bar.' And actually on the radio somebody said, 'Yeah, there's a new topless bar on Old Redwood Highway,'" Mark laughs. "It was really kind of unknown, the whole small plates tapas kind of thing."

It's the style of dining the Starks themselves prefer, very casual with a lot of interaction and socializing. "Our whole thing is you can still have really great food in a fun, relaxed environment," says Terri. While traditional tapas can actually be just a couple of bites of food, the Starks serve up small plates that more closely resemble appetizer portions. "We certainly didn't invent tapas; we just put our spin on it," says Mark. "Ours is like tapas on steroids," adds Terri.

The wine bar succeeds, creating a relaxed atmosphere while still offering high-end food and an upscale selection of wines. Dress code? Not an issue, as casual and relaxed is the theme of the day. Decor



Willi's Seafood & Raw Bar has casual, stylish indoor and patio seating. [Duncan Garrett Photography]

is the same: simple, comfortable and functional. And Willi's covered and heated patio is a great place to spend a relaxing afternoon with friends. In addition to small plates of food, wine can be purchased in small two-ounce servings as well, allowing for an impromptu tasting party.

Opportunity knocks

Success breeds opportunity, and with Willi's Wine Bar came offers and inquiries. Developers and landlords came knocking with prospective locations. "It took off right away. Anytime you're successful it kind of brings other opportunities with it," says Mark. "We definitely had lots of different styles of restaurants that appealed to us that we had some sort of connection to." "We have a few different ideas of fun concepts we feel would work up here," adds

Terri. "Then the location presents itself, and it's 'which one of the concepts is going to work in this location?'"

Their second restaurant, Willi's Seafood & Raw Bar in downtown Healdsburg, is in the heart of white-tablecloth Wine Country cuisine, heavily populated with tourists who've often been drinking wine all day. While they will likely eat at one upscale restaurant, they'll also need other meals. The Starks looked at what was already there and headed in the opposite direction. "So let's do something totally different. Beer, tequila and fried fish. That kind of stuff," says Mark. It's a process of blending location to concept while not stepping out of their comfort zone.

Close to home

Monti's Rotisserie, the third restaurant, probably had the toughest first six months of

all the Starks' concepts. But it's grown to be the most consistent restaurant in the company as far as steady flow. The Starks live near Montgomery Village (where Monti's is located), and they were already frustrated by the lack of local places to eat when approached with the spot. Again, it was a matter of matching a concept to the location. "This was a concept we really wanted," says Terri. "It was presented to us, and it made sense to us."

"Big chunks of meat roasting over an open fire. Who doesn't love doing that?" says Mark. The name represents the nickname of the Montgomery High School kids as well as the residents of the neighborhood. (Most important, the Starks can use the coasters they purchased by the tens of thousands for a price break: The letters "W" and "M" are interchangeable, depending on how you look at your coaster...)



Monti's Rotisserie in Santa Rosa's Montgomery Village is a carnivore's paradise. [Duncan Garrett Photography]

Monti's decor is perfect for its concept, solid and comfortable. The full bar takes up a large portion of the restaurant, and the Starks have created a lovely patio area for outside eating. However, the location in a shopping mall is a bit hard to get used to at first. Monti's is not the kind of place one stops at as an afterthought while out buying socks. The menu is full of creative small plates and dependable large plates, such as a grilled sirloin burger or a spit-roasted pork loin sandwich with pomegranate glazed onions. Depending on the day of the week, specials can include such items as wood-roasted suckling pig, crispy Liberty Farms lavender roasted duck or spit-roasted CK leg of lamb. Definitely a carnivore's paradise.

Late-night libations

Barcode was born out of necessity; after getting off

work from the restaurants at 11 o'clock, the Starks had no place to go. Neither did their dinner customers and visitors from out of the area, who routinely asked for recommendations. Again, someone who had just purchased the building approached them with the space.

The stylish watering hole caters to an upscale, grown-up crowd with deep pockets. Since the inventive cocktails are priced fairly high, patrons don't usually overstay their welcome. "It's very mature and adult-like...until we show up!" jokes Mark. There's also a menu of small plates for those who might get the late-night munchies.

The concept was originally to call it Twist, but the artist who built the bartop called it Barcode because of the sporadic pattern in which the colors and resins are pulled together. The name was too appropriate to pass up. "It's

really an artistic bar top," says Mark.

Barcode might feel more at home in San Francisco's financial district than in laid-back Sonoma County. And although there's a DJ booth and projection wall, it's not meant for the dancing crowd. The Starks wanted a classy place, and that's what they built. "The people usually already have their date; they're not looking for a date," Terry explains.

Future plans

Next up on the Starks' plate is the new steakhouse, which will make its debut in Old Railroad Square later this year. Once again, the location presented itself. "Somebody came to us and said, 'Hey, I have this space. If you guys did something, what would it be?' We said, 'Steakhouse!'"

"It's a historic site in Old Railroad Square called the Jacobs Building. It's been



Barcode, which serves up specialty cocktails to an upscale crowd, was created out of necessity. [Duncan Garrett Photography]

there since before the 1906 earthquake. Absolutely perfect," says Terri. The steakhouse will be about 5,000 square feet and seat 120. It will include a piano bar and a private dining room that can be used for regular dining when not reserved for events. The atmosphere will be masculine, with lots of dark leather and dark wood. "It's going to have a real historic feeling. We're really going to take the building back to where it used to be when it used to be a hotel," says Mark.

"We're really paying homage to the history of Old Railroad Square and Santa Rosa," adds Terri.

With 250 hotel rooms within walking distance, a comfortable atmosphere for business travelers dining solo as well as regulars is important. The bar will take up quite a bit of space, and the whole menu will be available at the bar as well.

What is often the biggest challenge for restaurateurs is what the Starks use to measure achievement. "Our

biggest gauge of success is our staff," says Mark. Currently, the company employs about 150, including 17 managers. The Starks use a promote-from-within strategy that lets employees grow within the company and work among the various locations. With one exception, all of the chefs and sous chefs currently with the company were, at one time, line cooks with the Starks. Employees don't have to leave to advance their careers.

The Starks plan to stick with what's worked for them. "We want to continue to always do what it is that got us here in the first place," says Mark. He's seen people often get buried in the growth of their business and, in the process, stop focusing on the passion that brought the initial success.

That's not likely to happen to the Starks as long as Mark keeps cooking and Terri keeps — as Mark puts it — "being Terri Stark!"

What's next on their agenda? Well, Mark thinks the

warehouses in Railroad Square would be a great place for a full-time, year-round farmers market, a la Seattle's Pike Place Market: "Don't we need one of those here?" Also he says an in-house, internship training program could be a great addition to his company.

"We don't have a plan. We're busy enough," Terri says. "But when the opportunity comes knocking, you kind of have to pay attention."

Words to the wise...



Willi's Seafood & Raw Bar in downtown Healdsburg has a full bar. [Duncan Garrett Photography]

The Starks have used their passions for great food—and great fun—to blend concept with location, creating restaurants that thrive in an industry with an incredibly high dropout rate. Together, their strength lies in concept development; individually, Mark loves cooking and food, and Terri's skills lie in the management and planning arenas. "She's the person everybody knows," says Mark. "Me? I'm always in the back."

Mark and Terri have visions of what their final products should look like and wholeheartedly jump into projects with a high degree of confidence in the outcome. "We do a lot of stuff on gut feeling," says Mark. "We think that's the way it's supposed to be. If it feels right, then do it. Who cares if it looks right on paper or not? We don't even do business plans. Throw it on a cocktail napkin!"

While the Starks do use certain tools to gauge where the restaurants are supposed to be, their conceptual approach is more creative. "I don't think you should go

and open a business like a restaurant based on numbers and papers and what the growth curve is. It's got to be passion, and that's exactly what it was for Willi's Wine Bar," says Mark.

"We kind of did our anticipated best, or worst, scenarios, and said, 'OK,' and that was about as much as we did," says Terri. It landed at best.

However, it's probably not just the Starks' enthusiasm and creativity that has brought their good fortune; both bring impressive food industry résumés to the table. Mark attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. He worked in Washington, D.C. at the Four Seasons Hotel, Maison Blanche and the City Club of Washington, and in Seattle at the Bellevue Club. He's been regional chef for the (nationwide) California Café Restaurant Corporation and corporate chef for Gordon Biersch Brewery Restaurants.

The couple met working together in Palo Alto at California Café, where Terri was catering manager. "They

had a no fraternizing policy, so they promoted him. It worked out great," she laughs. And from the beginning, a restaurant of their own was in the plans. The pair first founded Restaurant Lulu Catering in San Francisco, but when they bought Terri's grandmother's house and moved to Santa Rosa in 2001, they knew they'd found the right spot.

"The timing was just right," says Terri. "People here were so embracing of opportunity. We met a lot of people who were really helpful, and it just seemed like all of the doors started opening for us."

A home for Willi

Terri had routinely noticed the Orchard Inn, a German restaurant, while commuting to her job as director of sales at Vintners Inn. "We found that little roadhouse out on Old Redwood Highway and just fell in love with it," she says. When they had their first meeting with a restaurant broker, the site was mentioned in a laundry list of locations. "It was already listed. It was once again gut instincts."

Willi's Wine Bar, the first concept's name, is also the name of a well-known establishment in Paris recognized for being the first bar to sell American wine in the city. However, Terri Stark had no idea of that when she was a 22-year-old working at her first job out of college. An exiting manager gave her a poster and mentioned it might be worth some money someday. "So, I framed it, and I put it in my apartment," she says. Three years later