

BY MICHAEL BAUER

# An Oyster Oasis

Willi's brings sophisticated small plates concept to Healdsburg

Only a few years ago, the words sophistication and Healdsburg wouldn't have been used in the same sentence.

While a relaxed country atmosphere has been one of the perennial draws to the Sonoma County Wine Country, the lack of interesting restaurants was one of the reasons more tourists went to Napa. The depth of restaurant choices simply didn't match the quality of the wines coming from the area.

Today this cozy little town about 70 miles from San Francisco is undergoing a "St. Helenization" with the expansion of Ravenous restaurant and the opening of places such as Dry Creek Kitchen, Manzanita and now the stylishly delicious Willi's Seafood and Raw Bar just north of the square on Healdsburg Avenue.

Although the building where the restaurant resides is new and Willi's has been open only about four months, the place already feels like part of the landscape.

The rich aroma of spice greets the nostrils within a second of entering the door, and by the time you reach the host stand, situated near one end of the lively oyster and wine bar, you're salivating and wanting food *now*. Unfortunately, assimilating the 30 items on the menu is like cramming for an exam, and it takes a while to digest everything. It's not that the combinations are complicated; it's that everything looks so good. It takes a concert-

ed effort to limit your options: Fresh oysters from the raw bar (\$2-\$2.25)? Red snapper ceviche with citrus and basil sprouts (\$8)? Bacon-crusting broiled oysters (\$2 each)? Clam and garlic flatbread (\$7.50)? Brazilian-style seafood chowder (\$10)? All the options seem equally enticing.

cashews provide sweet relief to counteract the punch of the chiles. Hamachi ceviche (\$10) is also excellent; the large chunks are marinated in lime juice and rocoto chile from South America before being tossed with toasted pumpkin seeds.

Few if any places in the Bay Area

can get rolls stuffed with fried oysters and Meyer lemon tartar sauce (\$9.50); crisp calamari with flecks of bacon and a too-generous slather of hot mustard (\$7.50); or a Dungeness crab salad with cucumbers and avocado (\$10).

I also still crave the Arctic char (\$10), with toasted slivered almonds clinging to the outside like scales. The delicate fillets are further complemented with a lemon-caper butter, which soaks into the modest bed of sauteed spinach that forms a green mattress underneath.

*Bacalao* (salt cod) is becoming the *creme brulee* of small-plate restaurants, and each version I've tasted has a certain allure. The combination of the salty fish, creamy garlic and mashed potatoes is pure comfort, but Willi's adds a surprise. The basic ingredients are accented with white truffle essence, and at the last minute, the chef stirs in diced artichoke bottoms (\$7.50). The french fries (\$6) are just as distinctive; they're perfectly cooked and about half as wide as the typical McDonald's

style. They're piled onto the plate with Laura Chenel goat cheese ranch dressing, making me ponder why anyone would ever ask for ketchup again.

When you add in the Bibb lettuce salad (\$7.50) — and a few oysters, of course — you've constructed a perfect meal. In the center of a wooden bowl lined with frilly leaves is a mound of shredded apples, candied walnuts and torn bits of lettuce gauzy from the mustard dressing. The flavors intermingle, making it one of the best salads



Jack and Natalie Motto dine at the bar at Willi's in Healdsburg.

The restaurant, orchestrated by Mark and Terri Stark, who also own the wildly popular Willi's Wine Bar in Santa Rosa, looks to Latin countries and our own Eastern seaboard for inspiration on the seafood-heavy menu. Most dishes make the taste buds stand at attention, and at least five are truly memorable including the tuna tartare (\$9.50), one of five raw fish preparations. The tiny ruby jewels of fish are milky from coconut cream and spiced with jalapeno and ginger. Crunchy

offer New England-style rolls, with the seafood packed into a tender warm bun and slathered with butter or other sauces. The lobster roll (\$13) is one of those items that I'd be willing to make a special trip to enjoy again, the hot pungent garlic butter dripping down my chin. The bun is stuffed with chunks of seafood, fennel and bits of romaine lettuce all balanced by the warm bread and butter. It's pure indulgence, and better than anything I had on a recent trip to Boston. Diners also



Oysters on the half shell.

in recent memory. The hearts of romaine (\$7) is also very good, although the dressing was so thick that chunks of olives stuck to each leaf as if they were coated with Super Glue.

The menu offers five different skewers, and the night we were in the mood for sardines (\$7.50), they weren't available. We tried most of the others, however. Marinated chicken (\$8), minted lamb (\$9.50) and the chunks of hanger steak (\$10) were all satisfying but not up to the caliber of some of the other offerings. Neither were mussels steamed in garlic and parsley (\$8), a gooey crab cake presented on a busy base of Meyer lemon aioli, shredded bell peppers and other vegetables and a pequinillo pepper vinaigrette (\$11), and the pork riblets with a too sweet tamarind glaze (\$8).

For dessert (all \$6.75), the chocolate-mint milk shake, served with two chocolate cookies, was the standout, followed closely by the butterscotch flan served with tart cherries. The cinnamon doughnut holes were too dense, although the lemon curd dipping sauce was excellent; chocolate espresso pot de creme tasted more like a butter-oozing ganache; and the pear and ginger crisp was mushy without much crunch.

Yet for the most part the kitchen hits far more than it misses, and even the misses are pretty darn good. The

real challenge at Willi's is service and pacing in the kitchen. One reason restaurants like small plates is that this style of dining is easier for the staff. The cooks can prepare the dishes as they come in without having to time the entire first or second

#### WILLI'S SEAFOOD AND RAW BAR

403 Healdsburg Ave. (at North), Healdsburg; (707) 433-9191. Lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m.–9 p.m. Sunday–Monday; until 10 p.m. Wednesday–Thursday; and until 10:30 p.m. Friday–Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Fairly easy street parking.

**OVERALL:** ★★½

Food ★★½ Service ★★

Atmosphere ★★½

Prices \$\$ Noise Rating ▲▲▲

**PLUSES:** Many dishes are memorable including tartare, *bacalao*, fries, Arctic char and lobster roll.

**MINUSES:** Waiters can get backed up; the pacing of dishes can be uneven.

#### RATINGS KEY

★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★ Excellent

★★ Good ★ Fair □ Poor

(\$) Inexpensive, less than \$10

(\$\$) Moderate, \$11–\$17

(\$\$\$) Expensive, \$18–\$24

(\$\$\$\$) Very Expensive, more than \$25

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

▲ Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels)

▲▲ Can talk easily (65–70)

▲▲▲ Talking normally gets difficult (70–75)

▲▲▲▲ Can talk only in raised voices (75–80)

● Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

course for the entire table. However, at Willi's, diners can still experience excessive waits between dishes and a strange progression of plates. One time our salad came in the middle at the same time as one of the skewers, another time it came at the end, right after sauteed spinach with lemon and big chunks of roasted garlic (\$6). A little bit of planning and pacing would pay off in customer satisfaction. At times waiters also get backed up and service falters, but each has a charming personality and an aim-to-please attitude.

At busy times there's often a longer than usual lull before the food starts to appear, giving diners time to settle in and look around the 62-seat dining room which has a New Orleans-meets-Havana atmosphere. The bronze-hued tin tile ceiling hung with parchment drum lights and old-fashioned black wrought-iron fans help to create the illusion of an oyster bar. The handsome dark wood bar is defined by a

soffit fronted with scrolled tin panels that look plucked right out of the 19th century. The dining room, painted in hues of deep blue and sage green, is cleverly built on two levels, adding visual interest to what might otherwise be a boxy room. Windows on the opposite side reveal an outdoor patio with an additional 40 seats. Overlooking Healdsburg Avenue, the restaurant is a prime spot for a Wine Country getaway, a feeling enhanced by the calming splash of water that tumbles down the 20-foot high slate tile slab fountain near the entrance of the two-story building.

Taken as a whole, Willi's still provides a finely crafted package with interesting wines, vibrant foods and a relaxed atmosphere that offers a great hangout for locals, and fuels the Wine Country fantasy for tourists. ♦

*Michael Bauer is the Chronicle restaurant critic. E-mail him at mbauer@sfchronicle.com.*

#### THERE'S A LOT TO LIKE ABOUT WILLI'S WINE LIST

Diners don't need to know anything about wine to get the most out of the list at Willi's. Although there are only about 35 selections, the choices show loads of personality and enough variety to go with all the selections on the Latin-inspired seafood menu.

The list starts out with sherry, then segues into sparkling, raw-bar whites and then the various varietals. Pulling out the wines that go well with oysters into a separate category is commendable, and the selections are superb. Each wine also carries a description: The 2002 Pepi Oregon Pinot Grigio (\$5.75; \$14; \$27), is described as "tangelo, apples and floral notes with a cleansing finish." The Pinot Grigio, and all still wines, are offered by the glass, half bottle and bottle, and prices are very good. The wines are priced on a sliding scale, meaning the consumer gets a better deal on the more expensive wines, but all the pricing is fair.

The Chardonnay selection is particularly good, even with only four wines. As with other categories, they are arranged from lightest to heaviest, or more complex. Producers include Ferrari Carano, Geyser Peak, Ramey and Rochioli.

The handcrafted cocktail menu, and the selection of six beers by the bottle or on tap (\$3.25–\$4), is a nice adjunct to the wine list for those who want something different. There's the ubiquitous Mojito (\$8.50) a Lime Drop (\$8), Cuban Manhattan (\$8) and Blood Orange Martini (\$8.50).

Owners Terri and Mark Stark even pay attention to the nonalcoholic offerings, which includes Taylor Maid Iced Tea (\$3) and fresh-squeezed lemonade (\$3.50).

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$15.

—M.B.