

Something For Everyone

Willi's Wine Bar has a winning concept, but service needs fine-tuning

The aura of Willi's Wine Bar in Santa Rosa begs one to kick back and relax. It's both a drop-in kind of place as well as a destination. Tourists and hordes of locals can feel equally at home, enjoying a quick bite or lingering over a glass of wine.

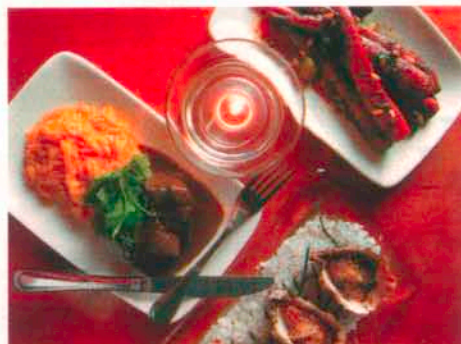
Willi's feels like the real deal.

Opened in August by Terri and Mark Stark, this New Age wine bar allows the husband-and-wife team to incorporate ideas from their years in the business. She was in charge of the catering arm of the Lulu restaurant group in San Francisco; he was the chef and top guy for Gordon Biersch and the California Cafe group (which includes the Napa Valley Grille).

At Willi's, Stark's not restrained by any pre-existing concept, so he feels free to go global. The consistent thread is that all 32 menu items are small plates meant to be shared. To complement the food, the Starks have created a diverse wine list of selections that come in 2-ounce, 5-ounce and half-bottle pours (see box).

The low-slung building on Old Redwood Highway is easy to miss, but you know there's something special going on when you see the jammed parking lot and a constant string of people trudging along the shoulder of the road from their cars to the front door.

Once inside the cozy 48-seat dining room, guests are overwhelmed with the exotic perfume of wok-charred calamari with green beans, onions and potatoes (\$8); sauteed Brussels sprouts glistening in sage brown butter with pearl onions and andouille sausage (\$6); and leek and goat cheese flat bread topped with braised artichokes (\$6).



From left: braised beef short ribs, Tunisian carrots and grilled oysters.



Willi's Wine Bar in Santa Rosa draws residents and tourists alike with its casual ambience.

The tables are laid out in a chockablock pattern with a grouping by the entrance and some tucked back into a nook at the back of the 14-seat wine bar, under a copper-panel ceiling. The largest seating area is around the front side of the bar, a relic from the Orchard Inn. The building that houses the restaurant was built in 1886 and still has that kind of clandestine feel that harks back to a previous incarnation as a rough-and-tumble bar.

The majority of tables are arranged on the patio, which is walled in-plastic so it can be heated and used year-round. The 70 seats look out over a fountain and garden, with the busy tree-lined highway visible from one side.

The food at the inn was German, but under Stark, that cuisine seems to be about the only one missing from the eclectic menu. Some dishes are wildly inventive and others comfortingly familiar. On the more inventive side, Stark stuffs pot stickers with five spice pork belly (\$8). The meat is marvelous, but the chef hasn't quite mastered the art of the dough. He

has a more nimble hand with the spring rolls (\$8.50), which he stuffs with brandade and serves with romesco sauce and an herb salad. The salty cod filling is smoothed by the Spanish red pepper-nut sauce, and the flaky wrappers add a decided crunch to the creamy filling.

The chef continues the Asian theme with hot and sour soup (\$7) that has a velvety texture and tingling taste, with julienne of mushrooms and smoked duck; and in the scallop dumplings (\$11), which he dresses up with pancetta and lemongrass butter. Stark's creative nature is further spotlighted in the pulled duck barbecue, with shreds of gooey meat mounded on a bed of soft polenta made even creamier with white cheddar cheese (\$9).

Italian flavors emerge in the the grilled local sardines served on a Tuscan bean salad with salsa verde and preserved lemon (\$7.50), or the black truffle risotto (\$12) with Parmesan, caramelized parsnips and leeks.

Stark seems to have an affinity for North African flavors. He slathers the Moroccan-style lamb chops

that brings out the delicate sweetness in the meat. The Tunisian-style carrots (\$6) feature whole carrots gooey with honey, cardamom, cinnamon and brown butter. Before serving, Stark sprinkles on pine nuts and flecks of fresh mint that cling to the darkly blistered exterior. A pile of olives on one side add a much needed salty tang to cut the sweetness of the sauce.

The chef pays homage to Northern California with one of the best crab cocktails (\$12) I've tasted. The flakes of seasoned crab are generously mounded in a martini glass with Meyer lemon creme fraiche, a match that's truly spectacular. Around the edges, he arranges potato chips lightly dusted with cumin, which shake up the palate and help to make every bite taste as good as the first.

Hog Island oysters are given star treatment (\$1.50 each). In one version, Stark grills them and drizzles on a pancetta-based sauce; the other version is chilled and drizzled with a vibrant vinegar sauce with fresh coriander. Both will convert even the most skeptical palate.

The garlic "fries" pay homage to Stark's time at Gordon Biersch. He quarters and fries locally grown German butterball potatoes and tosses them with white pellets of garlic, then presents them in a copper pot with a ramekin of ranch dressing made with Laura Chenel cheese (\$7). Skillet-roasted shrimp comes to the table sizzling and flavored with chiles, lemon and fresh coriander (\$11), yet another dish that pleasantly piques the taste buds.

While not every combination is a total



Veteran restaurateurs Terri and Mark Stark opened Willi's in August.

winner, the only one that seemed to have suffered from the chef's unbridled creativity is the homey macaroni and cheese, topped with a crisp dusting of bread crumbs and studded with cauliflower and onions (\$6.50). Unfortunately, the chef also mixed in Cambozola, but the tangy blue cheese left a bitterness on the finish that never mellowed. I tried it a second time, and still came to the conclusion that this update didn't do anything to improve this classic dish.

Desserts (all \$6) aren't as interesting as the main courses, but I'd come back again and again for the tangerine sorbet and white chocolate ice cream layered in a nar-

row parfait glass. It's a cool and refreshing counterpoint to some of the bold savory flavors that precede it. Vanilla creme brulee, topped with huckleberries, is exceptionally rich and creamy, and the warm chocolate soufflé cake with toffee ice cream is one of the better versions to be found. Like the mac and cheese, the rice crispy treats should have been preserved in their classic state. This lowbrow dessert may have been dressed up with caramel and peanuts, but it didn't work. The combination had an off-putting sticky texture and a metallic taste. It was palatable only when followed by a gulp of the rich hot chocolate served alongside.

The service has similar off-putting qualities. The staff is always pleasant, but the chef's handiwork is often negated by the fact that the waiters let diners use the same small plate throughout the meal unless they request new ones. On two visits we asked for new ones partway through, but on the third, we decided to wait and see what would happen. When you're trying to cut the New York strip oozing blue cheese butter (\$13) and pushing aside remains of the grilled oysters, roasted beet salad (\$7.50), goat cheese ravioli with white truffle oil (\$8), and wok-charred calamari, the flavors can get pretty funky.

In addition, pacing can be off. On one visit we ordered nine dishes and six of

WILLI'S WINE BAR

4404 Old Redwood Highway (near River Road), Santa Rosa, (707) 526-3096

Lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday and Monday. Dinner only 5-9 p.m. Sunday. Beer and wine. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Lot and easy street parking.

OVERALL: ★★½

Food ★★★ Service ★½

Atmosphere ★★

Prices \$\$ Noise Rating 65

PLUSES: Often exceptional combinations, served small-plate style. A charming, bustling interior that reflects the casual nature of the area.

MINUSES: Plates aren't changed out between dishes. Plates often come at once, creating a traffic jam on the table.

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.

Willi's calls itself a wine bar, but it delivers less than the name promises if you expect an exhaustive list and older vintage wines. It's not that the selections aren't good — they are — but most people would think that 34 wines is a little slim for a restaurant that seats 132 and offers 32 savory dishes.

However, the list is well edited and fairly well priced. Each selection is available in various-sized pours (2 or 5 ounces, by the half bottle or by the bottle), and carries a description that helps diners choose. Willi's also has a well-informed staff, uses great glassware and, if the table orders more than three or four different wines, will bring coasters that identify the selections. It would be nice, however, if they also suggested flights so people could taste around.

It's clear that the wines were carefully selected to go with the food. You'd be hard pressed to find a better match for the two oyster dishes on the menu than the 2001 Gusto Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand (\$26), nicely described as "lemongrass, apple and grapefruit with a lemon curd finish."

The 1999 Trimbach Gewurztraminer (\$32) goes particularly well with more assertive dishes such as the shrimp with chiles, lemon and coriander.

The reds tend toward the fruitier varieties, with five Pinot Noirs and four Zinfandels. Generally the choices concentrate on Sonoma, with representation from France, Australia, New Zealand and other parts of California.

The list also features eight dessert wines in 3-ounce pours, including the 2001 Ledson Late Harvest Orange Muscat (\$8), the 2000 Lawson's Dry Hills Late Harvest Semillon from New Zealand (\$7.50) and the 1997 Broadbent port (\$10).

All considered, Willi's really isn't a wine bar; it's an excellent restaurant with a small, generally well-priced wine list.

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

—M.B.

them arrived at the same time, making it impossible to really enjoy the experience. A little more attention to these details would quickly improve the dining experience — and the food.

Those problems aside, it's easy to see why Willi's has quickly become so popular.

It's a fun place to people-watch, and it successfully captures the casual, laid-back nature of the Sonoma Wine Country. ♦

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



Ahi tuna tartare with lemon, chiles and pine nuts.