



WILLI'S WINE BAR **Backgrounder**

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Long before Willi's Wine Bar was one of the most popular dining hotspots in Sonoma County, it was the venerable Redwood Highway roadhouse welcoming travelers at the northern limits of Santa Rosa. Then came the October 2017 wildfire that razed the historic 1886 landmark along with most of the surrounding neighborhood.

Though the old building is gone, Willi's Wine Bar lives on, thanks to Mark and Terri Stark, the husband-and-wife team who opened Willi's in 2002 as the first of their now six legendary restaurants in Sonoma Wine Country. The pair will soon unveil the newest iteration of their original eatery and, though the physical location will be different, the focus on small plates and superb local wines remains unchanged.

Chef Mark and Terri were among the first restaurateurs in the region to introduce the small-plate concept. "The idea of focusing on small plates stemmed from Terri's and my preference to sit at the bar and only order the appetizers," says Mark. Pairing small plates with an extensive array of wines by the glass has proven to be an enduring favorite of Willi's Wine Bar customers.

As they have with others in their portfolio of restaurants, the Starks chose a location for the new Willi's that is rich with historic significance, a hidden gem tucked into the Town & Country Shopping Center. This small, neighborhood marketplace has long been home to the Pacific Market specialty grocery store. Over the years, several of Santa Rosa's most creative dining establishments occupied the location where Willi's Wine Bar will reopen in spring 2019, including The Italian Affair, Lisa Hemenway's Bistro, and Chef Randy Lewis' Popina and Seven-0-Seven.

The menu at Willi's Wine Bar will continue to feature international small plates, some surprisingly creative and others comfortingly familiar. As is customary at every Stark Reality restaurant, the knowledgeable staff will offer pairing suggestions from the extensive wine list and, in this new location, will invite guests to linger in either the handsome, comfortable dining room with its view of the open kitchen or on the inviting outdoor patio.

Longtime customers will be heartened to find many of their favorite dishes back on the menu, including Tunisian Roasted Carrots, Moroccan-Style Barbecued Lamb Chops, and Ahi Tuna

Tartare. Many of these crowd-pleasers have been available at the Starks' other restaurants during the past year and will now migrate back to the Willi's menu along with several of Chef Mark's new creations. In addition to long-beloved menu items, returning guests will recognize numerous friendly faces among the staff, many of whom have worked at other Stark Reality locations while waiting for Willi's to reopen.

One element that survived the inferno more or less intact is the iconic, iron-forged Willi's Wine Bar sign. Currently undergoing restoration, it will once again grace the new Willi's, a familiar beacon on what was, and is destined to become once again, a fixture of the Sonoma County dining scene.