



## **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 seven legendary restaurants in Sonoma Wine Country. The pair unveiled the newest iteration of their original eatery in May 2019 and, though the physical location is 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.

The menu at Willi's Wine Bar continues to feature international small plates, some surprisingly creative and others comfortingly familiar. As is customary at every Stark Reality restaurant, the knowledgeable staff offers pairing suggestions from the extensive wine list and, in this new location, invites 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 were featured at the Starks' other restaurants while the new location was being built and have migrated 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.

The dedicated crew at Willi's Wine Bar continue to adapt to changes necessitated by the recent pandemic, adding takeout options, a cocktail bar, and expanding the patio to increase outdoor seating.

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

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