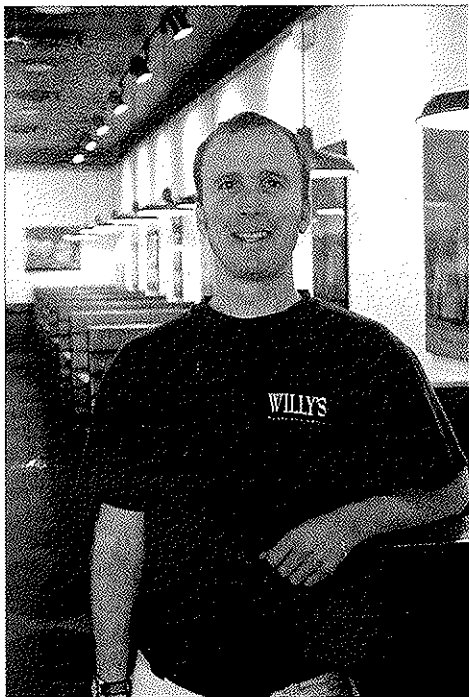


# Willy Bitter: The Brains Behind the Super Burrito



By Mary Pierce Zirkle

What began as one man's burrito addiction has grown into a 15-location burrito empire. Willy Bitter, founder and owner of Willy's Mexicana Grill, started the franchise in 1995. Here, Bitter, 41 talks about how his obsession caught on and became the obsession of many satisfied burrito eaters in Atlanta.

## What inspired you to open Willy's?

Growing up in Asheville, N.C., I was used to eating the more traditional Tex-Mex food – greasy enchiladas and burritos smothered in cheese. When I moved out West, I discovered a whole new side to Mexican food. First in Colorado...where I worked as a waiter and then in San Francisco, where I developed a serious problem with these huge burritos. It took almost an hour and two buses to get to my favorite burrito place in a decidedly sketchy area of town....I figured if it got me that bad, there were probably other people out there like me. Luckily for me, Atlanta is full of them.

## When did you open the first Willy's and where was it?

We opened our first location in the Roswell-Wieuca shopping center on July 13, 1995, which by the way has been recently remodeled and expanded. My family was a huge help in the beginning. My sister came up with the logo, did the books and helped design the space. My

mom came down for two months and worked side by side with me actually getting the place up and running. ...My Dad helped me out with financial support when not too many people were interested in funding some guy in his 20s talking about these huge California-style burritos....I certainly couldn't have done it without them.

## Did you envision a different career path for yourself?

Originally I had planned to go into marine biology, but the organic chemistry requirement took care of that. I still love the ocean and SCUBA diving and would love to be a volunteer at the Georgia Aquarium, if anybody from there is reading this.

## How do you maintain the popular status of Willy's despite the growing presence of competition?

Our focus is always on our food and customer service – that is what brings people back. With an ever-changing market, we are constantly trying to figure out how we can improve our menu and serve our customers better. We also strive to be a welcome addition to the community we do business in – we are a home-grown operation and want to get involved with the schools, the local community and give back to those who have helped make us such a big success. While it is important to be aware of your competition, we try not to focus too much

on what they are doing and instead concentrate on improving ourselves.

## What is your favorite dish at Willy's?

My favorite burrito has pinto beans, a little rice, steak, grilled onions and peppers, lots of fresh chopped jalapenos, homemade guacamole and some tomatillo sauce. My favorite taco is the "charolita" – it is a more traditional Mexican taco filled with steak or chicken, tomatillo sauce, coleslaw, onions and cilantro on a hard or soft-shell taco. I also crave our cheese dip – so much so that I only allow myself to eat it on weekends.

## What are your future plans for Willy's?

As long as we can find the best sites and great people to run them, we will keep growing. We are excited about our next location that is opening in Athens in September. **IN**

**IN JUNE**

**The Blissful Glutton's  
favorite mixologists**