

# knife & fork

The Insider's Guide to Atlanta Restaurants

IN THIS ISSUE:

Food  
 ★★★★★ Recommended  
 ★★★★  
 ★★★  
 ★★  
 ★  
 ○ Acceptable  
 ● Unacceptable

Creature Comforts  
 XXXXX  
 XXXX  
 XXXX  
 XXX  
 XX

Cost  
 \$\$\$\$  
 \$\$\$  
 \$\$  
 \$

Focus On: East Atlanta  
 Palmyra  
 Rendez-Vous Restaurant  
 RJ's Wine Bar (Report)  
 Sam's Food Mart (FoM)  
 St. Agnes Tea Garden (Report)  
 Travel Tip: Asheville, NC  
 Willy's Mexicana Grill  
 Woodland Restaurant

## Willy's Mexicana Grill ★★X

4377 Roswell Rd.

Open Mon-Thu 11 a.m.-10 p.m.;

Fri 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sat 11:30 a.m.-

11 p.m.; Sun 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.

No reservations (404-252-2235)

No credit cards \$

Every time we eat at *Tortillas* on Ponce de Leon (which is frequently), we can't believe that there aren't dozens of the darn things all over Atlanta. It's so cheap, so good, so fun, so basic!

*Willy's Mexicana Grill* isn't related in any way other than spiritually to *Tortillas*. The recipes are very different. The system isn't the same. But in its own way, *Willy's* operates on the same level as its soulmate. We can also see that it serves the same function in the community.

*Willy's* isn't any bigger than *Tortillas*. The line frequently starts on the sidewalk. There are a few plastic tables outside, which

give the newcomer a chance to ogle the food and nag eaters with "what's that" questions.

Operationally speaking, *Willy's* is a masterpiece. A big sign explains the system and asks that you have your mind made up before reaching the counter. What are your choices? Dish (burrito, soft or crisp taco, enchilada, tostada, quesadilla); meat (grilled cilantro garlic steak; grilled Sinaloa-style chicken marinated in orange juice, garlic and thyme; green mole chicken; pork carnitas); size (regular, special or super); beans (pinto or black); salsa (hot or mild).

Whereas *Tortillas's* burritos are shrouded in mystery, filled and wrapped in the kitchen, *Willy's* lets you watch everything as you snake past the various stations assembling your burrito. The first stage involves the staff grabbing a large flour tortilla from a steamer and plunking it on a square of foil. The rice goes in first, in a straight line, then come the beans, followed by the meat. Everything is ready in steam table bins.

The burrito travels to the next employee, whose palette includes cheese, guacamole, two kinds of salsa fresca, tomatillo salsa, Southwestern coleslaw, onion and cilantro, sour cream and a few more condiments. All along, you have the option to say "more of this, less of that, hold the sour cream." The employee completes a smart fold, closes the foil, encodes the wrapped burrito with a red marker and adds a few chips to your basket.

You follow your burrito to the cash register and by this time, you are pretty wild with anticipation. *Willy's* burritos are delicious. *Tortillas* has far better beans and gives you more of them. *Willy's* has a more Mexican flavor and a greater complexity. Don't even try to unwrap the burritos, but prop them on one end, tear off some of the foil and chew-suck your way to the hot contents. A

good tomatillo sauce and a splendid *chile de arbol* sauce sit on every table. Imported and domestic beers are available.

If you aren't very hungry or want a preview of the various meats and salsas, there is something called *charolitas*, which are small soft tacos with a meat, tomatillo sauce, red onions, cilantro and lime. Our favorite thing in the whole place, though, is a special green mole chicken burrito with pinto beans, rice, tomatillo salsa, onions and cilantro. The permutations are endless.

*Willy's* is an upbeat, colorful space with chunky wooden booths and excellent lighting. The restaurant does an extraordinary amount of business, some of it take-out. Family business is encouraged. Kids have a menu of their own, and we have seen young parents bottlefeed their offspring with one hand and manage a massive burrito with the other ■