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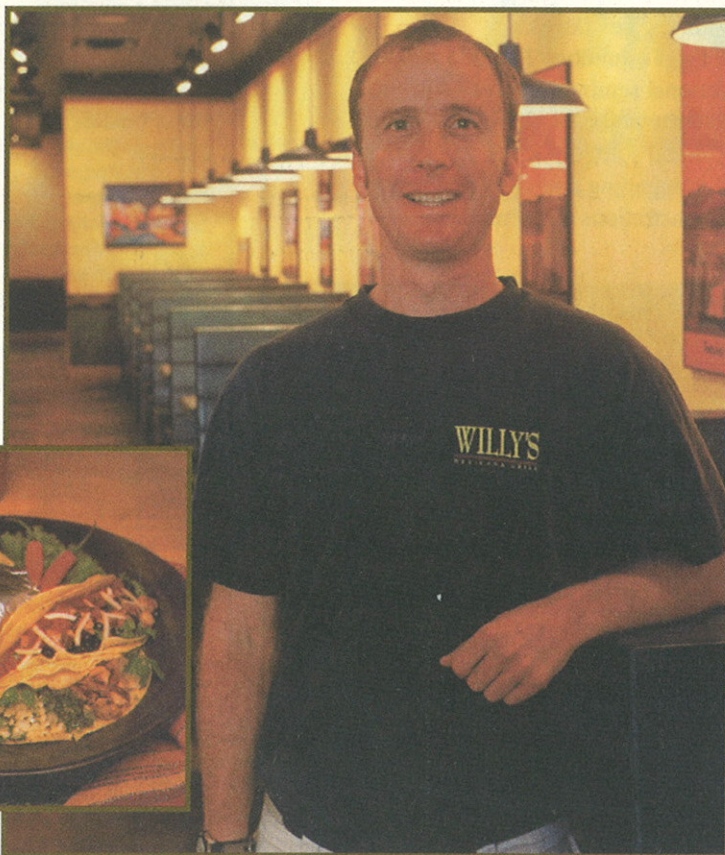
A
Shelby
Report

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ON THE CUTTING EDGE *with*

With warm and funky interiors, along with customized quick ordering, Willy's hits the spot with diners.



WILLY BITTER

In July 1995, Willy Bitter opened the first Willy's Mexicana Grill in Atlanta, specializing in big "California-Style" stuffed burritos, tacos, quesadillas and made-from-scratch sauces and a selection of Mexican beers. His simple but fresh food concept has been a success for the fast-casual format. This year Bitter opened his 15th restaurant in the metro Atlanta area and has a growing catering operation. See our story, inside.

INSIDE: Distributor Show Photo Coverage

BITTER SPICES UP FRESH, FAST, MEXICAN FOOD

As a child, Willy Bitter set his sights on becoming a marine biologist. But, as so often happens, his path changed, and the Asheville, N.C., native obtained a degree in economics from the University of North Carolina. Following a stint living, working and sampling authentic Mexican and Tex-Mex food in San Francisco, Bitter returned to the South with one thing on his mind. But it wasn't economics or marine biology—it was burritos!

In July 1995, Bitter opened the first Willy's Mexicana Grill in Atlanta, specializing in big "California-Style" stuffed burritos, along with tacos, quesadillas and made-from-scratch sauces, guacamole and a selection of Mexican beers. Once word of Willy's got out, customers flocked to the simple but fresh concept where orders were customized to the diner's preferences. The ambience also was inviting—designed with warm colors and the look of "a funky, colorful burrito joint," according to Bitter. In 2005, he opened his 15th restaurant in the metro Atlanta area. There's

Concept appeals to young professionals

also a kiosk in an office building in Midtown Atlanta as well as a growing catering operation.

Bitter, 39, recently spoke with Senior Staff Writer Mindy McBain about Willy's Mexicana Grill and its success in the Atlanta market.

What is the primary focus of Willy's Mexicana Grill?

It's mainly a focus on fresh ingredients. We make everything in the restaurant; we make our guacamole twice a day; we make our salsa every day. I guess "California," equating that with fresh, is what we're trying to do.

You opened in '95, yet fast-casual didn't really take off until about three years ago. Were you ahead of the curve?

I'd been out to California, I had seen how popular it was out there, and there was nothing really like that in this area. I figured as long as I can get good food out there and get a good location, people will come. Everybody knows our burritos,

but they can customize them exactly the way they want, and they get a huge amount of food for a great price. I knew that people liked good food at a good price, and they like it quick.

How did it do initially?

It took a while to get started because people weren't familiar with it. They just thought we were another Mexican restaurant, so it took a while for the word to get around about the kind of burritos that we were doing. We didn't have a lot of money for advertising; I was pretty new in the game and I was trying to make sure I was running a good store. After about a year and a half, we started doing really well. We opened our second store in '98. We've been (opening) about one or two stores a year. We'll keep growing as long as there are good opportunities, good sites and good people to run them. ... We're always willing to look at new sites and (see) if our types of customers are there. At this point,

we don't have anything planned ... outside of Atlanta.

Who is your target customer?

Probably 18 to 35 (years old)—a lot of young professionals... We also get a lot of families. At lunch, we'll get blue-collar, white-collar. The customer base pretty much transcends (description), but it's probably more 18 to 35 than anybody else.

Are your restaurants comfortable for dining-in?

We've got a long bar set up that's similar to Subway where you walk in and pick out what you want. We steam the tortilla, and then we put on rice, black beans or pinto beans and then the meat. They can choose whether they want black beans or pinto beans; they can choose whether they want the grilled steak, the grilled chicken, the adobe chicken, the tofu or the pork. Then it goes from the steam table to the cold side, and there they can get different toppings such as cheese, fresh guacamole, sour cream, black olives, lettuce, roasted peppers, fresh onions or jalapenos. Then we roll it up into a big, fat burrito and put some warm, fresh chips with it, they pay at the counter and sit down. There's no table service, but we're definitely more upscale than Subway. We probably serve about five or six kinds of beer.

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