

Char-Grill has been a Wake County mainstay since it opened its first location on Hillsborough Street in 1959.

photo: Char-Grill

## Staying power

During the past year, Char-Grill was transformed into a franchise, allowing for the eatery's presence to expand beyond Wake County. For more information on Char-Grill restaurants, call toll-free (888) 604-7455 or visit [www.chargrillfranchise.com](http://www.chargrillfranchise.com).

# Made to order

## Char-Grill fulfills 50 years of cravings

by Sandra Simpson

The Char-Grill on Hillsborough Street is quickly approaching its 50th year, and the good news is that not much has changed. The ever-popular old-fashioned, flame-broiled hamburger steak sandwich is still being served to a mix of loyal patrons, as college students, politicians, construction workers, and busy moms continue to line up for its taste of déjà vu dining.

Reminiscent of the small-town drive-ins of earlier times, Char-Grill has maintained the flair, flame and most of the same menu since its inception in 1959.

The creator and original owner of Char-Grill, Bruce Garner was more than just another colorful character. He compared

himself to a fighting rooster: "I can beat, kick and claw the hell out of any man who comes around Hillsborough Street — any comer, hood, pocket thief, or rod."

It is with this cavalier attitude that Garner bullied his way into the restaurant business. Rumor has it that when a neighborhood restaurant raised the price of a cup of coffee to 10 cents, Garner vowed to put them out of business. He opened the Blue Tower, a 24-hour restaurant nearby, which featured a long bar and cheap coffee. Soon afterward, Garner's 10-cent coffee competition permanently closed its doors.

Shortly after the Blue Tower's success, Garner moved his Hillsborough Street home to clear a space for Char-

Char-Grill's current owners Ryon Wilder and Mahlon Aycock purchased the establishment in 1975.

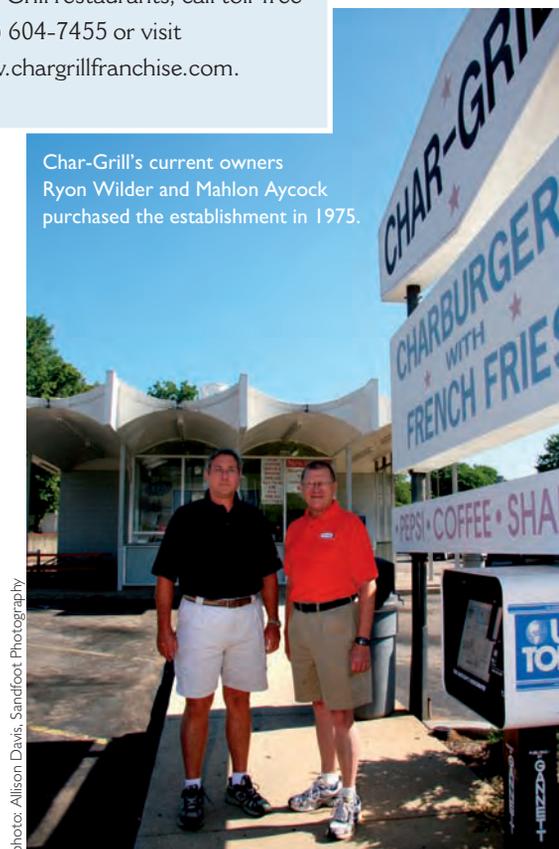


photo: Allison Davis, Sandfoot Photography

Grill and commissioned former Raleigh restaurant supplier Montgomery Green to engineer a grill to his specifications. The aroma from the “Garner-designed grill” still waters the mouths of anyone who ventures nearby, particularly those waiting to write their orders, drop their tickets through the slot, and watch through the large plate-glass window as the flame from the grill flares with the turn of each burger.

Garner also believed in opening Char-Grill for those with late-night hunger cravings, ensuring a devoted following of

nearby N.C. State University students.

### Passing the torch

In 1961 — just two years after opening Char-Grill — Garner died. His son-in-law ran the establishment until 1972. By 1974, the original Char-Grill building was empty, and there were plans to put a parking lot in its place.

When college friends Ryon Wilder and Mahlon Aycock first approached Dorothy Garner Vickers about buying her husband’s defunct business, they found her

cleaning thick grease from the walls of the vacant building. Wilder still remembers this encounter — the same as many others — with Vickers.

“She always spoke with a Pall Mall cigarette hanging from the side of her mouth, the ash remarkably long,” he says.

Aycock and Wilder quickly gained Vickers’ trust, negotiating a three-year contract for the resurrection of Char-Gill.

In April 1975, the eatery reopened with a full-time workforce of three — owners Aycock and Wilder, and employee Gary Parsons. For the first few years, it was 16-hour days, seven days a week. In 1977, the owners purchased the Char-Grill location from Vickers.

### Weathering the storm

As a testament to good food and the owners’ hard work, Char-Grill had survived at times that most restaurants did not. Two weeks after Aycock and Wilder took over, a major blow to their business occurred: Hillsborough Street changed from a two-way street to one way. Customer access suffered again when a portion of Hillsborough Street was closed due to bridge construction.

Patience paid off in 1987, however, when revitalization began to hit the area surrounding Char-Grill. On nearby Jones Street, the reopening of the 42nd Street Oyster Bar jump-started the arrival of many customers seeking upscale food and entertainment. Aycock remembers many visits from Thad Eure Jr., local restaurateur extraordinaire and owner of 42nd Street Oyster Bar and The Angus Barn.

“Thad referred to the chair in back of the Char-Grill as the executive dining room,” he remembers.

After many requests for neighborhood Char-Grills, in 1988 the owners opened a second restaurant on Edwards Mill Road in Olde Raleigh Village. The Atlantic Avenue Char-Grill opened in 1992, the Strickland Road spot opened in 1996, and in 2007 the first Char-Gill franchise was opened in Cary. **WL**

*Sandra Simpson is a freelance writer based in Holly Springs.*

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