



STORY

Will Haver, Founder

I am married to Leigh Kraselski Haver and have two beautiful and kind children, Sam and Elizabeth. My mother is Doris Haver Wilson and my father is Bill Haver. I have an older sister, Jennifer Russell Ard.

It's hardly original, but you are a product of your environment and the many experiences you have in life, the good and the bad. I don't discount the lessons I have learned from experiences or mistakes I have made in the past because it has all played in who I am today. Thank goodness my experiences have been mostly great!

Finding something you love to do, hard work, an appreciation for blessings, trial and error and experience are worth their weight in gold. I was born with a competitive drive and a yearning to please and entertain people...to make them happy and I have had a passion for restaurants, hotels and bars for as long as I can remember. To this day I have an appreciation for all styles and levels of great restaurants, hotels and bars. Fortunately for me, Birmingham, Alabama is a great town to live in if you love restaurants and food. We have some great ones. The culinary scene in Birmingham really spoils you. It is crazy good. There are other great food towns in America and beyond, but through my travels I've come to realize that our food scene has spoiled us.

Growing up in Birmingham, my parents had a vegetable garden at home. We grew tomatoes, okra, cabbage, zucchini, squash, etc. and my Mom would prepare a lot of home cooked veggies. That's where food started for me. When I was a baby, my mother made all of my baby food from fresh vegetables and produce (yes, it spoiled me). You can imagine the work. I ate so many carrots as a baby that my nose stayed bright orange all the time. By the way, I do wear glasses.

In our home, you ate everything on your plate before you were able to leave the table. My Mom was a great cook and was gracious enough to put a lot of time and love into preparing dinner. Like most, I was a picky eater early on but I grew out of that in my pre-teen and teen years when I became nothing short of a burger connoisseur, when I wasn't enjoying mom's home-cooked meals. It's funny though, how your tastes change - things Mom used to make me eat, I now crave.

To this day, my mother's best dish is her oyster casserole. It is seriously good! But she could rock out most anything. From the basics, to fine dining with an exceptional presentation, Mom has always taken a lot of pride in entertaining. The apple did not fall too far from the tree; my Grandmother Wardlow, my Mom's mom, was an exceptional cook as well, less gourmet in her approach but a great cook. It has always been frustrating for me because like my grandmother, Mom would cook by feel. I would always ask my mother for a recipe for something and she would say, "I just have to show you." There was no recipe. I have found in my experience that's how the best cooks do it.

My sister, Jennifer, is great cook as well. It's her Mac & Cheese that we have on the Taco Mama menu. We've taken some liberties, added a couple of ingredients, but it's hers and it's the best I have ever had. When Jennifer entertains, there is a lot of attention to detail and pride involved.

Mom's dad, Grand Daddy Wardlow, was a builder, but by all accounts, also an architect, just without the diploma. He planned, drew up, and built a lot of houses and did a lot of quality work.

Both sets of my grandparents had a strong work ethic and taught me the value of hard work and doing things right.

Pop and Granny Haver, my Dad's parents, lived in the country and always had a small garden but they also had friends who had larger gardens. Pop had an unbelievable work ethic, he'd work from day break to dark. I would often hang out with my cousin Charles, picking watermelons or fresh peaches to eat or helping shell beans in the summer. I spent a lot of time with both my Mom and my Dad at work and learned from both a strong work ethic and the importance of doing things right the first time. It took years off of their lives to pound that into my head but I thank them both for caring enough to do so. I was listening and watching more than I let on.

Mom is a very loving and caring person and also a well-known designer in Birmingham. She has owned Haver & Company, an interior design company, for the better part of four decades. She is so good at what she does; it's amazing. I definitely inherited some of her design genes and I can design, but nowhere near her level. It's not a skill that you can learn, it's something you are born with. She is also one of the best color experts in the business and it too just comes naturally. I was blessed with having a vision for design and what I call "feel" and a lot of it comes from being around my mother. She has a passion for it and she passed it on to me.

I also learned how to entertain from my mom. The small details and working to get it exactly right, that's the kind of work that I love. Everything that is thought out and done for a reason. Whether its design, food, or service, you have to love it and most people don't put that much effort in to it. Mom also showed me how hard you have to work when you have a small business and the many hats you have to wear. I would not be in business if it was not for my mother and the guidance and support she always provided to me.

Dad was very talented in his own right. I learned a lot about music, sports, and management from him. He too was a great father. From 1975 to 1992, he was the first headmaster of the well-known college prep school in Birmingham, Altamont. At the start, Dad wore many hats. In addition to headmaster, he was men's varsity basketball coach, orchestra teacher, tennis coach and he taught math. Dad is also a great piano player and a pretty darn good trumpet player and he is the reason I fell in love with music. When I was a toddler, Dad would play the piano and I would play the pots and pans with wooden spoons, until age 7 when I got my first drum set. Through music and sports, my Dad taught me about "feel" and rhythm as well. It all plays in business.

I grew up at Altamont, spending a lot of time at work with my dad. I learned not only work ethic but how to manage people and be a leader. Managing people is tough as you deal with various opinions and personalities, but Dad was a great administrator. He recognized talent, put people in a position to succeed and, considering the diversity of the group he had, got them all to work together to be great. I learned by watching him speak and the way he would interact with people.

Taco Mama:

I have been in the food industry since 1996. My first restaurant experience was as a server at Ezell's Catfish Cabin in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, working for Joe and Pam Ezell. I was 20. Not only was I a server, but also a dish washer, prep cook, and whatever else they needed me to do. I would have worked every day if they would have let me. Soon, I earned the opportunity to be an assistant manager and later became general manager. The Ezell's were great to me and I learned a lot about management and how restaurants worked from Joe and Pam.

After many years of working at Ezell's, I took a position as a food sales rep for the Alabama Food Group. They were a food distributor and the work provided a view of the restaurant business that was very different from my experience at Ezell's. I knew it wasn't my passion, but I was still exploring and it allowed me the opportunity to see a lot restaurants and the many different ways they operated.

After AFG, a man named Richard Gotlieb would prove to be a great mentor to me in many different respects. He operated Associated Brokers in Alabama, a successful food brokerage company, and though he was much older, we were from the same community and shared many mutual friends. We soon became great friends. He had started Richards Meats years before and built a large meat plant on Finley Avenue in Birmingham. He had retired after a very successful career and was a food broker to pass the time. He was extremely smart, very kind, a good person, and while I didn't love being a food broker, it was a good gig and a great experience. I knew why I was there - to learn from Richard, absorb his wisdom and experience. He was also kind enough to introduce me to many of his contacts in the restaurant business which gave me even more of an appreciation of the many different operations and their operators.

But I missed the action of the restaurant business. Through some friends, I partnered with a group of business people that wanted me to design a restaurant in Gadsden, Alabama. It was a great challenge and the process taught me many valuable lessons. I learned the significance of demographics and location, the value of people, and the importance of like-mindedness in business. It was my first time take a restaurant from concept to design and build. I was 27 and I was learning as lot through trial and error but I was sure of one thing – I made the best decision of my life and married my wife, Leigh, who is extremely kind, smart, and talented in many ways....but she will deny that.

Not long after, back in Mountain Brook, where I grew up, I learned that the local neighborhood tavern, Otey's, was for sale. With some help from a few investors, Leigh and I mortgaged our house and purchased Otey's around 2007. Otey's is pure, neighborhood tavern greatness and it was a decent income at 31 years old, but life makes its demands as children are born. We had to figure out a way to provide more money to support our family. If it wasn't for my wife, Leigh, being supportive with her hard work and a successful banking career we would not have made it. Business can be tough but Leigh has always encouraged me not to give up and has always supported us – she is an amazing woman. Restaurant people understand, it takes a special spouse to put up with the hours and demands of the restaurant business. If you love it, then you love it....and somehow they love you!

We had our first child and while I was not the primary bread winner in the family, that was fine with me, but I wanted to pull my own weight. We were getting by but I was feeling the pressure having a baby in the family and was concerned about how were we going to make it. There were many other things going on in our life at the time too, but looking back it was all for the good...God has a plan.

I wanted to create a restaurant near Otey's in Mountain Brook. Through owning and operating Otey's and working with really great people like Rodney Davis, Tight Chaney, Lauren Crow, Daniel Cox, and many others, we had built up a good business, and Otey's had become a staple in Mountain Brook and famous in Birmingham. I was hopeful I could open a new restaurant close enough to Otey's that I could manage both restaurants and have the support of friends and family to jump start it.

I was keeping an eye on a small corner spot in Crestline Village and was wracking my brain for the concept that would be the perfect fit. Travelling out West and to the Gulf Coast, I had seen cool, hole-in-the-wall taco and burrito shops in California, Texas, and Florida and that's what I kept coming back to.... a laid back, funky, fun taqueria with great tasting, fresh food, and a simple approach. Who doesn't like tacos, burritos and nachos? It was settled in my mind, but as I polled friends and family, they were not as excited.

I wanted the food to be exceptional. In my quest for great food, I had worked with many talented chefs but I had one particular friend in mind. Tim Hontzas was between gigs and I have always thought he was a very talented chef. He and I had numerous conversations about the approach I wanted to take and I felt confident that we would work well together. Tim's consultation and collaboration did not disappoint. Tim has since gone on to create his own fabulous restaurant in Homewood, Alabama – Johnny's and in doing so became a 2017 James Beard Foundation semi-finalist.

To compliment the food, I wanted an extensive margarita menu, again with simple, fresh, straight forward ingredients but I wanted them to be exceptional. That's why we hand shake them to wake up the juices and served them on the rocks.

The atmosphere had to be fun, funky and creative - like our food, the menu names, and the margaritas. I called Mom and told her my vision for what I wanted to accomplish and with her holding my hand and reassuring me in my design, the restaurant started to take shape.

My love of music always led me to feel that you could enhance the guest experience through the right selection of tunes. Therefore, we hand-pick all of the music to be played in the restaurant to this day. Like the orchestra my Dad directed, it all plays together: food, drinks, atmosphere and people. It's all important. It's all deliberate. We had to come up with a logo and a friend who owns a PR and design shop in Crestline Village stepped up with direction. Kim McKimmon and her trusty sidekick Blair Thompson at Bowe Creative, did a brilliant job in helping me with the design of the Taco Mama logo.

We opened the doors in 2011 and the restaurant took off from the first night with a line out the door and we keep adding Taco Mama fans every day. It means the world to us that people support us like they do and to allow us the opportunity to follow our passion and spread the Taco Mama love. Great food, great margaritas, like-minded people, funky atmosphere, and supporting our friends and communities is what Taco Mama is all about. We are all about turning guests into friends and making them happy. It's our passion.

Thanks for making us great!!!!

Mama says keep rocking it out....