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## Wilton's Oyster Bar

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Oysters don't inspire ambivalence; people tend to loathe or love them. Firmly in the latter camp, I was delighted to be invited to the new-look Wilton's. Established in 1742 as a stall selling oysters, shrimps and cocktails, Wilton's has moved from Haymarket, to Trafalgar Square, and finally to St James's during its long reign as London's most iconic seafood restaurant.

For those who have been before – be you civilian, film star or aristocracy – don't expect any radical changes. As designer Phillip Hooper puts it: *"The idea was to brighten up the bar and to make it a bit more accessible; it couldn't be anything that's too avant-garde, it needs to feel cosy and safe and that's why people like it."*

For the first time, guests can now visit Wilton's and enjoy a drink at the bar rather than having to dine, and there is a new, lighter bar menu to complement this set up. Upon entering, regulars will notice that the heavy curtain from the front window has been replaced with etched glass, lending the space a lighter, more inviting atmosphere.

My guest and I pulled up a chair at the bar, where we were immediately handed the menu by the waitress or “nanny” as they’re referred to at Wilton's. Dressed like a war-time matron, our nanny was expertly discreet but the House Manager later reported they used to be quite forceful: *“There was a time when they could be overheard telling their guests they couldn’t have any pudding until they’d finished their greens.”*

**"...six Royal Warrants for the finest oysters and the present Oyster Opening Champion in the kitchen..."**

Glad to be in more temperate times, we turned our attention to a menu which tempted from all angles; Dover Sole Meunière or Roast Grouse? Twice Baked Cropwell Bishop Stilton Soufflé or Spelt Risotto with Butternut Squash? Sensing our indecision, the Restaurant Manager swooped to our rescue. Gleaning that we wanted to keep it light and stick to seafood, Vincent – who was wonderful in a way only a French maître d’ can be – suggested we start with a plate of mixed oysters followed by the dressed crab.

Beautifully presented on a bed of ice our selection of Loch Ryan Natives, Jersey Rock and Colchester Natives swiftly arrived. With six Royal Warrants for the finest oysters and the present Oyster Opening Champion in the kitchen, it was no great surprise to find this selection was absolutely pitch-perfect; as was the crisp white Burgundy that accompanied.

A surprise course of Wild Scottish Salmon was presented next – those covetous glances at our neighbour’s dish must have been picked up by Vincent’s extrasensory perception. Far too good for any Grizzly Bear, this light course, complete with a sweet flavour and a hint of oak smoke, was also spot-on.

Under a watchful portrait of Wilton’s creator, George William Wilton, the dressed crab arrived looking too good to eat... almost. Our light-footed nanny returned to offer dollops of mayonnaise, before we dutifully polished off this incredibly delicate and sweet dish - highly recommended.

We finally tore ourselves away and bade farewell to our nanny and Vincent. Wilton’s may have been revamped but its status as a British classic remains untarnished – let’s hope it remains as such for many years to come.