

# SPEARS

## Wiltons' refurb is the pearl in its oyster

7TH MARCH 2014 by [WILLIAM SITWELL](#)

### HOLDING BACK THE YEARS

Early January, and as I walk through the smart and elegant streets of St James's in London do I detect an air of uncertainty? Is there a small cloud hiding the sunny light of confidence that should beam from every smart businessman or establishment type who stalks these streets?

I saunter down Jermyn Street, and as I pass the salmon pink exterior walls of Wiltons I sense that something is amiss. From within the walls of this bastion of British restaurantness comes the noise of drilling. As I pause, the smell of paint emanates; a man in overalls emerges with his mate and says something in Romanian cockney — the language of the building trade these days — and I have my answer.

Wiltons is shut for refurbishment. Cue panic among the crusty suit-and-tie-wearing, lamb-chop-and-claret-browsing-and-sluicing mob. For if Wiltons is shut, where could one possibly eat? Well, in one of the clubs of St James's Street of course. And it's only five weeks.

There are a few other restaurants in town, so one could abate this panic.

For further clarification on this Wiltons-shutting-down-for-weeks chaos I seek out the house manager, 52-year-old Michael Stokes, a stalwart of the place for fifteen years, who I discover is seeking solace a few doors away at Franco's, which like Wiltons is also owned by the Hambro family. He is at a table in the restaurant suited and booted and putting on a brave face.

Apparently the work is being enacted to create a new bar for the customers or guests — or even family, as they like to think of their band of loyal diners. It means a guest arriving for a table without having booked and realising their regular table is gone and they'll need to wait six minutes for another can have a glass of champagne or a Manhattan, and ease down an oyster while they recover from the shock.

Stokes speaks in Jeeves-like tones. He has that well-honed butling ability to ask one, for example, to refrain from using one's mobile in a way that makes one feel one is being congratulated rather than bollocked.

He reassures me that the five-week period should not be too painful for his guests as most of them take four weeks over Christmas anyway. 'It shouldn't be a major inconvenience,' he says, not quite adding 'Sir', but then I am a journo in jeans and trainers scribbling what he is saying into a notepad.

## **Second home**

A few weeks after our chat, Wiltons has reopened and the establishment once again knows what day it is by a visit there. For according to carving trolley lore, Monday is lamb, Tuesday pork, Wednesday beef, Thursday gammon and Friday salmon coulubiatic.

'We get to know you,' Stokes says of his regulars. 'We know what you like and what you don't like, where you like to sit and who you want to be served by. When people come in the door, we say, "Welcome home." We want people to kick their shoes off.'

That's a metaphorical kicking-off of shoes, of course. If you actually kicked off your shoes you'd be gently escorted on to the street. For Wiltons, which was first established in 1742 and has enjoyed various locations around Mayfair and has been in Jermyn Street since 1984, is strict about what you can wear before being allowed to settle into a booth and order a typical dish of Dover sole or lamb cutlets.

In recent years, though, they have deliberately let standards slip. You no longer need to wear a tie and can even today — shock, horror — walk in without a jacket. But don't go crazy. 'No sportswear, no short-sleeved shirts, no open-toe shoes and no shorts,' says Stokes. 'One man's jeans can cost as much as another man's shorts — you have to move with the times,' he says, 'but we don't allow trousers with holes.'

Rules are stricter these days when it comes to mobiles. A sign in the entrance reads: 'At the request of our clientele please refrain from using electronic devices beyond this point.'

'There should be a time when you are free from your mobile,' says Stokes. 'A gentleman should be able to tell his PA he is going out for lunch and won't be contactable between the hours of twelve and two. We are more than happy to pass on a telephone message.' So that means no laptop presentations and no texting.

And what if someone starts watching YouTube on their phone? I ask. Stokes shudders as if he's just heard that war has broken out: 'That would be stamped on immediately,' he says sternly.

## **Retro classics**

Meanwhile, thirtysomething Yorkshire-born chef Daniel Kent does his best to turn out the food that is expected. Mainstays on the menu are dressed crab, smoked salmon, turbot, halibut, seasonal game and the restaurant's most popular dessert, bread-and-butter pudding.

'We're actually regressing in time at the moment,' says Stokes. 'The chef has put dishes such as Dover sole Veronique [with white grapes] and sole bonne femme [with mushrooms] on the menu.' And it seems those gents are cheering him to the rafters. And not just gents. 'A lot

of ladies are now coming to Wiltons,' he tells me happily, while I inwardly tut, of course, and imagine they'll be giving them the vote next.

They are, believes Stokes, happy to join the regulars, whom he sums up as 'senior businessmen, lords and ladies, MPs, junior members of royalty and celebrities. We assure them of good food, good service and discretion. What happens within our walls stays within our walls.' So Stokes shimmers off to check lobsters or something and I pledge to book a table and order a new suit especially. *In addition to the new bar, Wiltons is now open on Saturdays. More information from [wiltons.co.uk](http://wiltons.co.uk)*