

the guardian

Wiltons, London SW1 – restaurant review

A woman swoops past in a snood. I don't mean a cool scarf-thing; I mean the kind of net cage, secured by black velvet, that makes sure an expensively streaked bun doesn't escape into the community. There are chaps in ancient, Wooster-ish tweeds, but also a few characters like the one with Elvis-ish ebony bouffant, mustard silk jacket and international sex-pest belt buckle. Hubba. An ancient Japanese man is slumped over the bar, picking desultorily at a lobster. He probably owns Taiwan. The staff jolly him: "Better than anything at [Tsukiji](#), huh?" "No it isn't," he growls.

[Wiltons](#) is Another World. I've been drawn here by news that they've updated the decor, which, to its clientele, is as shocking as [Bobby Trendy](#) being drafted in to tart up Mount Rushmore. For this place is The Establishment writ so large, it's blinding. Stoic in the face of world wars and recessions, always based around St James's, Wiltons has continued to serve without a stutter since it launched as a restaurant in the 1840s (it had been an oyster stall since 1742), nothing interrupting its chorus of cheery, deferential "good mornings".

The changes are, well, subtle. To me, it all looks pretty much the same as when I last came here about 10 years ago. Back then, the place's almost exclusively male stuffiness made me feel like a naughty schoolgirl, a stereotype I imagine the designers of the female staff's uniforms discarded before deciding on an outfit that says "nanny with medical skills" in shades of Germolene and Pepto-Bismol.

The food is that over-used phrase, the best of British. It really is. (Apart, perhaps, from the most beautiful, lacquered smoked Norwegian salmon from [Hansen & Lydersen](#).) Stickily braised short-rib from [Rhug Estate](#). Oysters straight from the old briny: creamy, almost hazelnutty little Jerseys; fat, meaty Colchesters. The prawns in their cocktail (oh yes) are just-landed fresh, as sweet and tender as langoustines, and come in cream-laced marie rose, poster sauce for retro luxury, plus there's an extra boat of the stuff to ladle on should madam so wish. That salmon has a salad of such spring-like delicacy – tiny shoots and leaves and buds of peas – it almost sparkles.

I have lobster and caviar omelette (swoon), swollen with seafood, lounging in a pool of invigorating bisque, its surface so impossibly smooth, it looks airbrushed. The pal has a monkfish dish that's almost daringly contemporary: crisp on top and served on a bed of

sea beet, cockles and bacon. "You'd like truffle mash with that, madam?" Oh, god, yes, we would.

I've no idea who the chef is. Easy to find out, I suppose, but that's not the point. Wiltons is above all that sort of cheffy stuff. It's about the customer, about making them feel like the potentates they probably are, about setting up their bloody marys and black velvets as soon as they walk in the room. This time, I don't feel like a naughty schoolgirl, I feel like a leftie mole, waiting to be ejected for my lack of patrician genes and scuffed shoes. I've even ignored the "no mobiles" rule and snap away like a right prole. Even the crockery is beautiful.

Time may have stood still at Wiltons, preserved in aspic – and laced with sauternes, obviously – but what is emphatically *de nos jours* is the bill. We choose mostly the cheapest options – the set lunch, a 44 quid bottle of Torroxal albariño from the scaredy-cat's end of the wine list, only one pudding from the set menu (a crème brûlée as stout and stiff as some of the customers, with peepshow pink rhubarb sorbet and compote), no aperitif, no coffee, no liqueur. Yes, yes, the lobster and caviar omelette: but at £31 it's way less than the £49 grilled turbot or £46 "seafood salad" starter – what's in it, unicorn de mer? Do I love Wiltons? Hell, yes. But I'm waiting for my damehood before ever going back.

- **[Wiltons](#)** 55 Jermyn Street, London SW1, 020-7629 9955. Open Mon-Fri, lunch noon-2.30pm, dinner 5.30-10.30pm. About £60 a head for three courses à la carte; set meal two course for £30, three for £38, all plus drinks and service.

Food 8/10

Atmosphere 8/10

Value for money Couldn't possibly say