



## Classics Revisited: Wiltons

*Saturday-night opening and a sensitive refurbishment mark the latest stage in the evolution of one of London's oldest restaurants*



BY BEN MCCORMACK

FEBRUARY 21, 2014 08:00

"You can tell the state of the economy by how many tables are taken at [Wiltons](#)," Michael Heseltine once quipped, thus exhibiting an aptitude for the off-the-cuff sound bite one wishes today's sticking-to-the-script politicians could master. But while one may regret the Coalition's absence of a Hezza-level bon vivant with a taste for the bon mot, dinner at an almost-full Wiltons suggests that the Government's economic policies, at least, should provide reason to smile.

Wiltons vies with [Rules](#) (est. 1798) for the title of London's oldest restaurant, although Rules wins on a technicality: Wiltons started life in 1742 as an oyster barrow on Haymarket, but didn't become a restaurant proper until it set up shop on Ryder Street in 1840. Since 1984, Wiltons has called Jermyn Street home and

recently underwent what in its glacier-paced history passes for seismic change: it's now open on Saturday evenings, the bar finally functions as somewhere to have a drink and the dining room has been opened up and made less fussy.

Infrequent visitors, however, will be hard pressed to observe anything different; a subtle refurb, like a good haircut, should be one that nobody notices. The velvet banquettes are still in situ and the walls remain hung with the sort of art one might expect to find on a shooting weekend at a country house – a house where, unlike chez Heseltine, no one would snipe that the owners had bought their own furniture.

And the waitresses still wear an almost maliciously unflattering get-up that makes them look like scouts at an Oxford college. "I'd like the lemon sole with caper berries, lemon and croutons," I said to the lady serving me. "And would you like that grilled, poached or meunière?" she asked. "Lemon sole with caper berries à la meunière?" I queried. "I think, sir, that you'd prefer the Dover sole, meunière, and would you like it on or off the bone?"

I suspect that there's many a captain of industry who will feel a delicious frisson of submission in being ordered what to eat by a uniformed woman the wrong side of 40. And submission really is the best course: the sole had been perfectly sautéed to a Platonic ideal of golden brown and the butter melted to the limpid yellow of young Sauternes.

Elsewhere, there are glistening oysters the same shade of pearly beige that wedding-dress designers employ for their more modish clients; delicately flavoured smoked Lincolnshire eel, rosy pink around the edge and fading to cream within; spiffing extras such as celeriac purée, homemade chips and triangles of buttered brown bread; and a sugar-dusted cherry and raspberry soufflé endearingly leaning to one side.

Wiltons mascot is a jolly-looking lobster wearing a top hat and bow-tie, clutching a champagne flute between its pincers and looking for all the world like a crustacean equivalent of Beau Brummell. This dapper fellow is a clue to the prices here: if you balk at the thought of paying £28 for a smoked salmon starter, the mark ups on the wine list will temporarily turn you teetotal. But Wiltons is no place for austerity, and it would be swimming against the tide of history not to indulge in everything that this best-of-British restaurant still has to offer.

**Who to take:** Your mother. If nothing else, you'll most likely double the number of female diners

**What to order:** The Wiltons Selection of a dozen oysters stays true to the heritage of the place