

An effortlessly superior taste of the best of British food

Joseph Connolly wanders into an area choked with history – and into the ‘perfect and traditional’ restaurant of his dreams

SOME days I feel so very much more British than others – do you ever get that? One can go through phases of being so terribly disillusioned over all that has become of this green and pleasant land, what with every sort of decline and dilution you can bear to mention, and thinking maybe the time has come to throw in the towel and push off to somewhere balmy and a less expensive. And to sip the good but simple local wine while ambling through one’s olive groves.

But it only takes a rerun of some or other marvellous old black-and-white film (preferably made during the war and starring John Mills or David Niven, with the mighty support of all those reliable and nameless but so familiar faces, not to say a doughty complement of strong and handsome women who were brave and humorous and thoroughly capable) to be sharply reminded of all the wonderful things about Britain that still, at core, make us what we are. And suddenly the whole of Europe is foreign – no more than a gimcrack and gaudy little bauble, on a par with Christmas tinsel: nice for the holidays but you wouldn’t want to live with it.

It’s the same with eating out. If one is served a truly fine example of French cuisine in the best of Michelin-starred restaurants, one comes to understand the Gallic and unshakeable belief in its utter superiority. In Britain, every nationality of cuisine has its fanatical following, though few could recall the last occasion when they were rewarded by the great delights of English cooking. My memory is sweetly chock-full of it, however, because the other day I had the most comfortable and enjoyable lunch in ages, at probably the most effortlessly superior English restaurant of all: Wiltons in Jermyn Street.

I am very much a fan of Jermyn Street, and in particular of Hilditch & Key – founded in 1899 and the finest shirtmaker in the world, its clientele over the years ranging from such as Christian Dior, Coco Chanel, Garbo, Dietrich and the Duke of Windsor all the way forward to Karl Lagerfeld (all those weird and wonderful white creations)

Sarkozy and half the Rolling Stones (not Ron Wood, obviously – and you don’t seriously imagine we’re talking Keef now, do you?).

So it was that I got talking to the owner Michael Booth who told me the rather exciting news that he had just bought another Jermyn Street landmark, Bates the hatter, where Hockney gets his caps and Terry Pratchett his trademark fedoras. Bates also dates from the 1890s, though its survival appeared to be doomed due to the coming redevelopment of the entire corner block where it has traded for more than a century. Mr Booth, therefore, is something of a local hero – a white knight in shining worsted who doubtless can commission a toning sable fur-felt jousting helmet with petersham-trimmed visor, thoroughly replete with cashmere plumes.

Where better then to celebrate such a marriage than in yet one more Jermyn Street institution – Wiltons, directly opposite Hilditch & Key’s main outlet (there is another one up the road) in which Bates has been given a shop within a shop, pride of place being reserved for Binks, the tooth-hatted and cigar-smoking stuffed cat which has been one of London’s minor spectacles for years. Wiltons, though, makes Hilditch and Bates look like a



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couple of new kids on the block, having been founded in 1742. God, I do love this area – it’s just so choked with history.

The frontage is understated – a discreetly curtained window bearing the motif oyster in gold, and little else. Step in, though, and immediately you are wafted away to a much, much better time – here is the perfect and traditional restaurant of your dreams: the softest carpet, the softest voices, the softest lighting – and me, soft-headed at the sight of it all. Pale putty panelling, a long and glittering marble-topped oyster bar where the venerable and expert white-coated shellfish men seemed to be having a shucking good time – and then on in to a curiously busy and crammed yet utterly calming series of dog-leg turns and hideaways, velvet-lined mahogany booths, heavily draped windows, lit-up oils and perfectly presented tables. The scene is exactly as it would have been in pre-war days – and look! Over there! It’s John Mills and David Niven! Well no, okay – but it was Lord Carrington and AA Gill (not at the same table), who both know a thing or two about food. Actually, the Gill thing is quite illuminating – I said hello to him just a week before in St John in Clerkenwell, and now here. So you see: when restaurant critics aren’t doing what they have to do, they slope off to places such as this for a cut off the joint and a bit of peace and quiet.

So: mahogany booth. Not Mr Booth, you understand – he’s quite pink. The menu is crammed with all the things for which this place is justifiably famous – oysters, game, sole, shellfish – and the a la carte is undeniably very expensive. But there’s a set lunch that’s a true bargain at £45. No no, listen – it really is a bargain because apart from being excellent it includes not just three courses but also a glass of white wine, a glass of red, half a bottle of mineral water – from Blenheim Palace, not at all surprisingly – as well as coffee and sweets. See? Michael and I ordered white crab meat: first rate – a very generous mound of the freshest crab on half a peeled avocado, with optional Marie Rose. The white burgundy that accompanied this was perfectly



Joseph Connolly was so impressed with Wiltons, he wanted to turn into John Bull.

chosen and unusually raising – and because this starter appears on the a la carte at £15, already you’re on to a winner. And then there’s the trolley. Pish – trolley is far too small a word for this glorious contraption: what we have here is the grandest sort of covered wagon, baroque and gleaming silver – the opulent rickshaw for a comparatively modestly proportioned nabob. And within it: superb sirloin joints from the Mey estate (where the Queen Mother was always so jolly in her castle) – one rare, one not so. Four fine slices with Yorkshire pudding (but of course), good gravy, roast potatoes and green beans. Heaven, right? The beef was utterly melty, utterly lean. And with it, a glass of Cahors 2004, a Bordeaux, lovingly poured into huge and proper glasses by an affable sommelier. All the staff here are the very best – they treat you with the right blend of acknowledgement and complicity: a good time in Wiltons is visibly had by all.

I was pleasantly full of beef when the trancheur with his glittering stagecoach sidled along and asked if we would care for a couple more slices. Oh God I couldn’t, I protested: well yeah, okay then. So: new plates, new King’s Pattern silverware, yet more beef, gravy and another

FACTFILE

WILTONS

55, Jermyn Street, SW1.
Tel: 020-7629 9955

Open Monday to Friday only, lunch and dinner.

Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

Cost: £45 for set lunch: three courses including two glasses of wine, half a bottle of mineral water, coffee and sweets. (Bargain).

Yorkshire. Bliss. And were the English treats now over and done? Not a bit of it – one great and very welcome surprise was yet to come in the form of the cheese course. I say very welcome because often in restaurants it’s just not worth bothering with the cheese: mean little triangles of refrigerated nothingness. But here...! Stilton, well obviously, but a proper

truckle: can’t remember the last time I saw one. A whole great linen-swathed truckle, your creamy portion gouged out of its belly. Keen’s cheddar too – which, along with Montgomery, is my favourite. And Carr’s Table Water biscuits. Of course. Then coffee. Then a strong reluctance to ever leave this place. I vowed to go back the following week. See? I told you that’s what restaurant critics do, given half the chance.

Brimming with grub, and also Englishness, outside I asked Mr Booth to make for me a short top hat sporting a Union Jack, so that henceforth I can become John Bull. He stood in Jermyn Street and smiled benevolently – prosperous, and practically master of all he surveyed. A lesson to us all, then: if you want to get ahead, get a hatter.

All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

If young children want to be able to scribble on their bedroom walls, get a painter or paint an area of wall in their room in matt black paint and give them some chalk. There’s even special blackboard paint now too.

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