



Written by
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Three stars on and offline



Today, every restaurant has to have a website. But in the case of the three very different London restaurants I have had the pleasure of eating in over the past week, each website distinctly and clearly tells a particular aspect of the restaurant's own story.

We began at **Xu**, the Taiwanese restaurant established by the successful JKS restaurant group that has played a major part, along with Brindisa and Palomar restaurants, in the renaissance of Rupert Street, a hitherto neglected street to the south of Shaftesbury Avenue.

Xu, like Hopper's and Gymkhana that are also part of the same group, is an artifice, a throwback to a restaurant of yesteryear. In the same way as Hopper's entices you into the warmth of Sri Lanka, and Gymkhana into the days of the India of the Raj, Xu aims to reflect the charms, the 'cool', of downtown Taipei of the 1930s.

The designers have made the most of what was an unprepossessing interior through dark wood panelling; a clever bar, with special wooden circles to hold your drinks, at which we sat for five minutes and enjoyed an extremely good martini; and a very effective use of pen-and-ink drawings of scenes from Taiwan that set the tone.

The food, as I have written before (see [Two worthwhile London newcomers](#)), is spicy and delicious. Excellent peanut-dusted lotus crisps; shredded beef served in a bone marrow with pancakes; a chilli crab served in a crab shell with fermented shrimp and fried mantou and small buns from northern China; and best of all a really spicy version of mapo tofu, silky pieces of tofu, in a sauce made from green Sichuan peppercorns from Yunnan province.

Yet their website goes one stage further, describing, after a brief video of what the restaurant strives for, something very special and very particular – and, in fact, nothing to do with either food or drink.

This is all about their two mahjong rooms, which are located on the ground floor of the restaurant and where this traditional Chinese tile game can be played – the sound of clashing tiles used to be one of the predominant noises of the East. These spaces obviously serve as an extra attraction either to those, like myself, who were once keen players of the game, or anyone wanting to learn (the rooms come equipped with an operating manual on how to play). Here, a tasting menu is served. This represents both a very clever use of space and an equally clever piece of marketing.

The physical website for **Supawan**, a Thai restaurant on the unprepossessing Caledonian Road in King's Cross (for which I owe a big thank you to Marina O'Loughlin's column in the *Sunday Times* a fortnight ago), is much more basic. Its home page features a Google map of the area and the restaurant's details while the second section, Menus, reveals the ethos behind the restaurant as well as the name of Supawan's founder.

Kin Dee, Yuu Dee, Mee Suk is the Thai saying that translates as Eat Well, Live Well, Be Happy and seems to motivate all the restaurant's staff (this saying reappears at the bottom of every bill, too). And this philosophy certainly seems to have inspired its restaurateur and original chef Wichet Khongphoon, who came to the UK 20 years ago to study hotel sales and marketing, branched out into flowers, opening the Aflorum flower shop next door, before becoming a restaurateur. The name of the restaurant comes from his niece, who died aged 35.

On the night we ate there Khongphoon was in full view, wearing the constant smile that is the hallmark of so many Thais and sporting a white chef's jacket over a pair of blue jeans. He was in his element, obviously relishing the extra custom that the *Sunday Times* review has brought in as he seemed to sashay in between the closely packed tables.

Supawan describes itself as serving the food of southern Thailand and our meal certainly brought back memories of our two holidays near Krabi, south-west Thailand, although without the added attraction of sitting at a café on the beach with our feet dug deeply in the sand.

However, the food did go some way to mitigating this. We began with laab aubergine, the diced vegetable served with roasted rice, tamarind and a mint dressing; lon, prawns in coconut milk; Thai squid; Ka-nom Jeen Gang, a yellow prawn curry served authentically with the rice noodles on the side and cha plu leaves (smaller than betel leaves); followed by scoops of their delicious home-made ice creams, coconut and salted caramel and black sesame. With a bottle of Muscadet (Ch de Coing at £28) my bill for two came to £84.94. As those on the table next to us agreed, it is a very convenient restaurant for anyone heading home on the last train to Royston.

The website of the long-established **Wiltons** fish restaurant on Jermyn Street is characteristically more sedate, more historical and, unusually, more personal.

It opens with a detailed history of this 276-year-old restaurant and proceeds with an account of how in 1942 a bomb fell close by, shattered the nerves of its then owner, Mrs Bessie Leal, who promptly vowed to leave London. Spotting Mr Olaf Hambro at the bar, she asked him whether he knew of anyone who wanted to buy the restaurant and he replied, 'that he did not know of anyone but himself', adding 'put the restaurant at the end of my bill'. This she did and the Hambros became restaurateurs, adding subsequently Franco's very close by.

It is the section under People in the bottom right hand corner of the Wiltons website that is the most interesting. Alongside numerous men who work there are two women whose functions are often underestimated and overlooked. First of all there is Georgie Smith, who is in charge of events and their extremely profitable, I expect, private dining room, and then there is a photo of Sophie Gill, Wiltons' office manager, without whom the establishment would not prosper. Bravo!

Wiltons' à la carte menu has changed little over the years with a heavy emphasis on oysters, shellfish, fresh fish and game in season. It is resolutely English, heavily male but actually not as expensive as it once seemed. My lobster bisque, which was very good, was £14; my fillet of brill that had been perfectly poached was £30 and came with an excellent béarnaise sauce. The £105 that Wiltons asked for the bottle of 2010 Château La Garde showed, however, where the restaurant makes its profit!

But at least on this occasion we were spared the embarrassment my late father caused on my first visit to Wiltons in 1978 with my old friend Geoffrey Lander, then a lowly associate with Nabarro Nathanson, the law firm, but en route to becoming a partner specialising in property. Across from our table was another one occupied by the then managing partner of Nabarro's. My father, in a voice loud enough to be heard across the restaurant, toasted Geoffrey before adding 'and it is very nice of Nabarro's to be taking us Landers out for such a fantastic lunch'. On that occasion my father paid.

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Supawan 38 Caledonian Road, London N1 9DT; tel 020 7278 2888

Wiltons 58 Jermyn Street, London SW1Y 6LX; tel 020 7629 9955