

Fish



London's fish restaurants are a curious mix of ancient and modern. Some of the capital's oldest dining establishments specialise in marine life – the staunchly traditional likes of **Sweetings**, which has been trading from the same City premises since 1889, and **Bentley's Oyster Bar & Grill**, whose ancestry can be traced back to World War I. Two of the most famous old-timers add a large measure of glamour to this upper-crust British template: **J Sheekey** and **Scott's** (both now owned by Caprice Holdings) have benefited from the popularity of high-protein, low-fat fish among the calorie-conscious beau monde. Among the newer breed of fish restaurants, **Applebee's Café** uses sparkingly fresh specimens from its fishmonger's business to create Mediterranean-style dishes. To find out which stocks of fish and seafood are certified as sustainable, consult the Marine Stewardship Council's website (www.msc.org).

Central City

Sweetings HOT 50

39 Queen Victoria Street, ECAN 4SA (7248 3062).

Mansion House tube. Lunch served 11.30am-3pm Mon-Fri. Main courses £12-£27.50. Credit AmEx, MC, V.

As much a City institution as the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street, Sweetings has been providing unfussy fishy lunches from the same corner site since 1889. Arrive early or late otherwise you'll invariably have to wait in the bar (no bookings are taken), along with the predominantly suited clientele, for a seat at the shared wooden tables in the back room (surrounded by old cartoons, photos and cricketing memorabilia) or on a high stool in the front. The long-serving, white-jacketed staff are an affable, no-nonsense lot – much like the food – and are well used to being trapped behind their counter, doling out cutlery and topping up wine glasses, for the entire lunchtime. Fish and chips, smoked eel, potted shrimps and market-fresh fish (offered grilled, steamed or fried, on or off the bone) is typical of the traditional, simply cooked fare; there are also specials such as lobster salad. A public school background isn't essential to appreciate Sweetings' eccentricities, though a liking for steamed syrup pudding and spotted dick will help. Don't expect to linger with a coffee at the end of your meal; it's not served in order to speed up customer turnover.

Available for hire (dinner only). Babies and children admitted. Bookings not accepted. Takeaway service. Map 11 P6.

Leicester Square

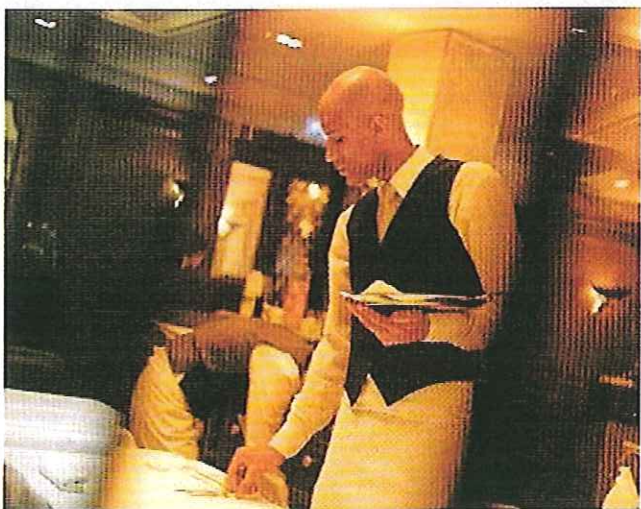
J Sheekey

28-32 St Martin's Court, WC2N 4AL (7240 2565, www.j-sheekey.co.uk).

Leicester Square tube. Lunch served noon-3pm Mon-Sat; noon-3.30pm Sun. Dinner served 5.30pm-midnight Mon-Sat; 6-11pm Sun. Main courses £13.50-£39.50. Set lunch (Sat, Sun) £25.50 3 courses.

Credit AmEx, DC, MC, V.

Sheekey's is the consummate theatreland restaurant. Its walls are lined with acting greats, as often are its tables (along with those who aspire to be), and the buzz is as thrilling as an opening night. Many diners opt for the fondly remembered salmon fish cake or spectacular fruits de mer. Nevertheless, it's worth casting your net wider: perhaps a starter of pickled arctic herring with potato salad and dill sauce, followed by a fillet of organic salmon with Suffolk bacon and razor clams. Don't forget to check the weekly specials for the likes of grilled turbot with béarnaise for two, or a lobster salad featuring new-season potatoes and asparagus. British cheeses, welsh rarebit and herring roes on toast provide appealing savoury alternatives to the lengthy list of puds. Staff don't always perform at their best, at times giving the impression they're too cool for school, but on the whole Sheekey's is a slick show and



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still one of the hottest tickets in town. Enjoy it for a fraction of the price at weekend lunchtimes when the mood is relaxed and friendly and a £25.50 set menu takes centre stage.

Babies and children welcome: colouring books; high chairs. Booking essential. Disabled: toilet. Vegan dishes. Vegetarian menu. Map 18 D5.

Mayfair

Scott's

20 Mount Street, W1K 2HE (7495 7309, www.scotts-restaurant.com). Bond Street or Green Park tube. Meals served noon-10.30pm Mon-Sat; noon-10pm Sun. Main courses £15-£39.50. Cover £2. Credit AmEx, DC, MC, V. The menus of Scott's and J Sheekey aren't identical, and the decors are vastly different, but there's an undeniable sense of formula to these Caprice Holdings operations. Scott's is the flashier, wealthier younger sibling – a hedge-fund manager to Sheekey's theatrical sophisticate – but the moment the corporate bread basket lands on the table you know you're visiting a blood brother. Scott's pricing may suggest a desire to keep out hoi polloi, yet it attracts a diverse crowd, particularly at weekends when family groups sit alongside sports-casual celebs, couples of all ages, and friends who've come up west for posh fish and chips. Tables are laid around a large central bar and a space-age-style crustacea altar laden with oysters, caviar and other goodies. Such seafood and a clutch of asparagus dishes could make the list of starters redundant, but there's a further dozen or so offered, including a lovely heritage vegetable salad with goat's cheese to keep many a waist-watching WAG happy. The cooking is mostly accurate – we enjoyed wonderfully tender razor clams sautéed with seashore vegetables and cured ham, and moist, herb-roasted monkfish – though rhubarb and custard trifle easily outclassed a bland chocolate tart for dessert.

Babies and children welcome: high chairs. Booking essential. Disabled: toilet. Separate room for parties, seats 40. Tables outdoors (7, pavement). Vegan dishes. Vegetarian menu. Map 9 G7.

Piccadilly

Bentley's Oyster Bar & Grill **HOT 50**

11-15 Swallow Street, W1B 4DG (7734 4756, www.bentleysoysterbarandgrill.co.uk). Piccadilly Circus tube. Oyster Bar Meals served noon-midnight Mon-Sat; noon-10pm Sun. Main courses £8.75-£36.

Restaurant Lunch served noon-3pm Mon-Fri. Dinner served 6-11pm Mon-Sat. Main courses £18.95-£38. Both Credit AmEx, MC, V.

The classy alfresco terrace has made Bentley's an even more attractive dining destination and, as long as the weather's in agreement, we'd choose this or the ground-floor oyster bar over the upstairs grill restaurant any day. Add in the private dining rooms, and the operation – which first opened in 1916 – extends over three floors of this Victorian building. The decor of the oyster bar has an Arts and Crafts flavour, with red leather and marble surfaces; its retro vibe adds to the fun of supping here, whether alone, in pairs or a group of four (tables are small). Our only complaint is with the service: not from the dextrous chaps shucking oysters at the bar, but the length of time cooked dishes take to arrive from the kitchen and the over-relaxed attitude of those staff working what few tables there are. Don't ignore the bread basket: the soda bread is superb (as

it should be, given owner Richard Corrigan's Irish heritage). First-timers and the unconfident should opt for the reliable fish pie accompanied by bottles of green Tabasco sauce. Adventurous foodies will revel in the likes of mackerel and oyster tartare, or squid stuffed with chorizo and feta. Cheese figures large on the dessert list, but who could turn down wild damson and blackberry trifle paired with a glass of Sauternes? *Booking advisable. Disabled: toilet. Dress: smart casual; no shorts. Separate rooms for parties, seating 14 and 60. Map 17 A5.*

West

Notting Hill

Geales

2 Farmer Street, W8 7SN (7727 7528, www.geales.com). Notting Hill Gate tube. **Lunch served** noon-2.30pm Tue-Fri. **Dinner served** 6-10.30pm Mon-Fri. **Meals served** noon-10.30pm Sat; noon-9.30pm Sun. **Main courses** £8-£29.50. **Set lunch** (noon-2.30pm Tue-Fri) £9.95 2 courses. **Credit** AmEx, MC, V.

In tandem with Notting Hill's gentrification, this former chippy (established in 1939 on what is still a fetching little backstreet) has leapt up the social ladder since the '90s. Glance at Geales' effortlessly sleek diners and you may think that prawns and lemon atoli, followed by lobster linguini with garlic and tomatoes, or perhaps a seafood platter, would be mainstays of the menu. Yet though these dishes are on the list, and there's a champagne and oyster bar to boot, British seaside classics more than hold their own: the likes of battered cod, chips and mushy peas (at £19.85, including 'discretionary' 12.5% service, mind), followed by apple and blackberry crumble or jam roly poly. Vegetarians aren't forgotten (there are salads and a wild mushroom tart) and neither are meat-eaters (with various grilled steaks), but fish is the thing – witness the vintage photos of fisher-folk decorating the battleship-grey walls on both ground floor and first. Standards are generally high.

Babies and children admitted. Booking advisable Fri, Sat. Separate room for parties, seats 12. Tables outdoors (10, pavement). Map 7 A7. For branch see index.

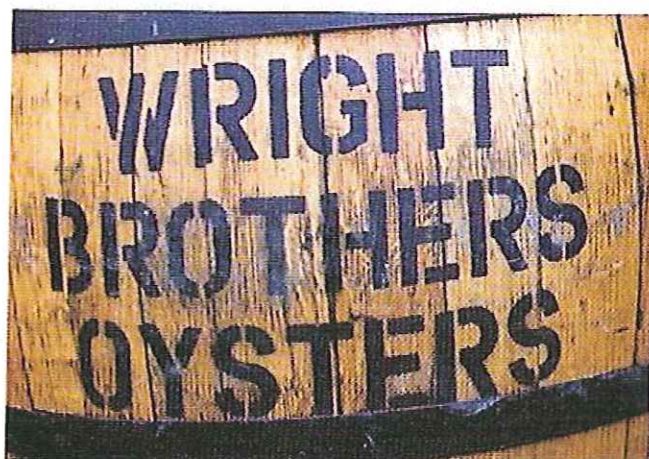
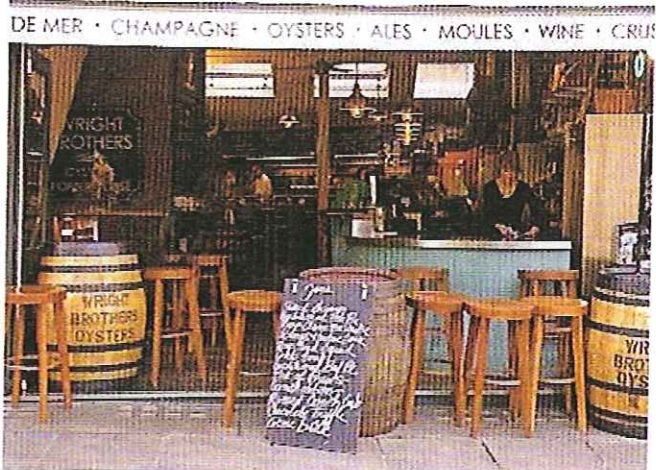
South East

London Bridge & Borough

Applebee's Café

5 Stoney Street, SE1 9AA (7407 5777, www.applebeesfish.com). London Bridge tube/rail. **Lunch served** noon-3.30pm Tue-Thur; 11.30am-4pm Fri; 11.30am-4.30pm Sat. **Dinner served** 6-10pm Tue-Thur, Sat; 6-10.30pm Fri. **Main courses** £11.50-£23. **Set lunch** £14.50-£17.50 2 courses. **Credit** MC, V.

This Borough Market favourite prides itself on its unpretentiousness. It has chequered orange, white and blue tiles, banquettes down one side, and seats along the bar from where customers – some conducting business meetings, some socialising – can watch the day's catch being prepared. Applebee's is looking a little scuffed at the edges, but the food remains memorable for all the right reasons. Come in the daytime, and you can also buy fish from the shop at the front



Wright Brothers. See p85.



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