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The Providores, restaurant review: "There seem to be eight elements to each main - and that's before the salt and pepper"

It's a refined palate that can work its way round that, says Amol Rajan

[Amol Rajan](#)

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The Providores is smart going on stuffy, with a hushed atmosphere

(Jonathan Gregson)



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The Providores and Tapa Room: two restaurants, not one – the clue is in the name. Downstairs, at the latter, they serve tapas, apparently, though the name derives from a massive Rarotongan cloth – made from hand-beaten mulberry bark, and from the Cook Islands – that hangs on the wall, rather than the little dishes you know so well. All this I surmise from sources, as I've never eaten there. Where I have eaten is at the posher sister establishment upstairs.

It was opened in 2001 by Kiwi Peter Gordon and three pals, and is the beating heart of what has rightly been described as one of the most exciting streets in Britain for foodies. I recently reviewed Fischer's, the outstanding Mitteleurope venture from Chris Corbin and Jeremy King just up the road; there is also Orrery, originally designed by Sir Terence Conran; Patricia Michelson's La Fromagerie is around the corner; and this is where the first and (probably) best London branches of Le Pain Quotidien and The Natural Kitchen can be found.

The Providores is smart going on stuffy, with a hushed atmosphere this Friday lunchtime that is nothing like the hustle and bustle I'd been told to expect. The lunch menu is toward the upper end of what one might expect to pay in central London, with only one starter under £10. That, as it happens, is the best: cream of butternut squash with Parmesan and rosemary crouton, and star anise pulled pork (£8). The rosemary infuses the whole dish, and the shards of hot juicy pork are spicy and delicious.

There is also the best laksa I've had in London. This Singaporean noodle soup is infused with crab and coconut flavour, and is served with a bream and pink peppercorn dumpling, soft boiled quail's egg, crispy shallots and coriander (£11.80). For £12.50, there's scallops with celeriac purée, fennel, apple and

radish salad – this dish goes on a bit – manuka honey, yuzu (a Japanese citrus fruit) and crispy shallots. That's a lot of elements, which leaves the scallops, which had too long frying in the pan, lost amid the hubbub. And at this price, that's not good.

There are more Asian influences among the mains. Spiced dahl stuffed tempura inari pocket – six words I never thought I'd say together (inari is a kind of sushi) – comes with aubergine, spinach, and yellowbean ginger dressing (£17); and there's pan-fried gilt-head bream with Thai black rice, clams – this dish also goes on a bit – coconut, tofu, aubergine, curry and coriander, which comes in at £18.

Do you spot a pattern here, guys? That's right: there seems to be a minimum of eight elements to each main, and that's before you get to the salt and pepper. I cannot say the dishes are bad, or poorly cooked; but these are plates of food for palates more refined than most. Nothing wrong with that, as such; just make sure that you're not in the mood for cod and chips.

To give you a sense of what to expect instead, here's another of the mains, also £18: twice-cooked sweet-and-sour Dingley Dell pork belly – eight more words I never thought I'd say together (Dingley Dell is high-grade "ethical" stuff, not a reference to the 1972 album by rock band Lindisfarne, which is spelt "Dingly"), garam masala-spiced butternut-filled dosa, spinach, curry leaves, black vinegar. Now, I know about dosa, and this one is respectable, but the spinach neutralises the pork and the black vinegar dominates the dish.

There are good cocktails, a wine list with many of New Zealand's finest, and decent desserts – of which two scoops of sorbet with ice cream and a strawberry compote, and a lovely chocolate mousse are the best. But these are £9.80.

Gordon has become a powerhouse of the London food scene. He was a consultant for Gourmet Burger Kitchen (also set up by Kiwis); executive chef of The Sugar Club, which spread from New Zealand to Notting Hill; and owner of the excellent Kopapa in Covent Garden, where Google bigwigs and Lib Dems breakfast (though not together). Providores, his original and his best, is technically ambitious and worth a visit – just don't forget your credit card.

7.5/10

*The Providores 109 Marylebone High Street, London W1, Tel: 020 7935 6175.
£100 for two, with drinks*