

HOW rich are you ...? Sorry to be so forward, but I'm taking it for granted that you like to eat out and appreciate fine cooking and a decent drop of wine – but the candid question I have to ask you today, I'm afraid, is this: how rich are you?

Because I'm about to point you in the direction of a very good restaurant indeed, whose chef, the New Zealander Peter Gordon, really does know what he is about ... but dear me, for a seemingly modest little restaurant, it has to be said that you do need a fair wodge of readies to be able to appreciate it. Even at lunch time – because at The Providores in Marylebone High Street, there is no set lunch on offer, but instead a fresh a la carte every day, some of the very unusual and rather exciting dishes at the most gulp-inducing prices I have seen in quite a while.

I was lunching with my dear old friend Jon Riley – once my editor at Faber, and now editor-in-chief at Quercus (publisher of Stieg Larsson's megaselling thing about a Girl with a Dragon Tattoo, this year's most fashionable accessory – the book, I mean ... though maybe the tattoo as well, who am I to say?). We were having a drink in what used to be a pub, just around the corner: the name – The Coach Makers – and the architecture were properly pubby, as was the bar and the rather pleasant leaded glass windows, but that's as far as it went. The rest was all scrubbed pine tables, low leather sofas, ironic baroque mirrors (I think they're ironic – they certainly ought to be) and of course lots of hard wooden chairs from a church, complete with the little box at the back for missals and songsheets. It seems mandatory to have these in gastro-joints, these days – one really does wonder how our denuded places of worship are coping, now that all their pews, pulpits, chairs and maybe even hassocks have been confiscated wholesale by the designer crowd. Maybe the churches are all rammed with bar stools, dartboards, skittles and cribbage sets that the pubs all turfed out eons ago. I quite liked The Coach Makers – and they had a decent prosecco, which at the moment is just so cool and now that it is only a matter of a very short while before it is derided, along with Mateus Rose, Lambrusco and Bull's Blood as just too passe to have truck with. And memories of all these

Masterful merging for the very rich among us

Joseph Connolly samples some of the fantastic fusions around, but the sky high prices are less than tasty



awful wines came back to me in a rush as I stood upon the threshold of The Providores. Because I remember this building well – it used to be Finch's Wine Bar, in the days when a wine bar was a coveted oasis amid a terrible and sticky-carpeted desert of Hironnelle, Castella cigars and packets of cheese and onion. Apart from the deathless Cork & Bottle in Cranbourn Street, I'm not sure that wine bars exist any more: wine no longer has

to whiningly cower within a ghetto of its own – we're all so sophisticated these days that decent wine is everywhere, I am very pleased to say. And particularly in Marylebone – fast becoming one of my favourite parts of London, what with the shops, restaurants, proximity to Regent's Park and even the walkability of the pilgrimage to the shrine of the venerable patron of the middle classes, the blessed St John of Lewis. My guest was

FACTFILE

THE PROVIDORES AND TAPA ROOM

109 Marylebone High Street, W1.
Tel 020 7935 6175.
□ Open Mon – Sat 12–2.45pm, 6–10.45pm. Sun 12–2pm, 6–10pm.
□ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
□ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
□ Cost: Yes well, rather a great deal. A three course lunch for two, with modest wine, could be about £150. Much cheaper in the Tapa Room.

actually born in Marylebone – in a police flat, his father at the time being the local Station Sergeant, rather in the manner of Dixon of Dock Green. He remembers it as a rather shabby and nondescript environment: not so now. God it's so swish: right next to The Providores is something called The American International University London, which sounds like a hotel and looks like a clothes shop. Because the windows are full of clothes: so much about modern life is puzzling.

Downstairs at The Providores is the more affordable option – the Tapa Room: clearly very popular. Long blond wood tables and pendant lamps that look like hanks of albino bananas. The restaurant proper is up one floor via a bare wooden staircase and walls the colour of, um – well Bull's Blood, really – and the blissful air conditioning on this sweltering day was already a very good start. The room is white, functional and unatmospheric, but the brown leather chairs and banquettes are comfortable, the perfect white napery crisp, and the glassware and cutlery utterly sparkling. The smartly turned

out waitresses are welcoming and friendly – and I wondered why only three tables were taken in so evidently professional and confident a set-up as this. Well it's the prices, see ...? Starters rising to £22. Yikes. This was roast New Zealand Wagyu beef with a marinated beetroot salad, red onion jam, smoked chilli and yuzu jelly with black sesame rice cracker. Sounds like too many disparate ingredients, doesn't it?

All the dishes were like this – went on for ever. But everything came together extremely well with every course: fusion indeed, and worthy of the name. I encouraged Jon to go for the Wagyu because he had loved it when in Australia. This Japanese strain of beef, you may know, lives a more pampered life than anything on the planet, with the possible exception of Hugh Hefner. The animals are massaged. They drink beer and eat only of the finest. They each have three blonde girlfriends.

The beef came as four slimmish chunkettes propped upon what looked like a sensational salad; I grabbed a morsel, and it was remarkable – soft in a milky way, while not discernibly tasting of actual beef, rather strangely. The rice cracker seemed like a cross between a Farley's rusk and a wasps' nest and was much appreciated. Jon also loved the yuzu jelly, but then don't we all? I, meanwhile, had potato gnocchi and lemon braised baby gem, roast artichoke, goat's curd, roast tomato, herb sauce and Chinese black vinegar. Now despite there being at least three things in there that I don't actually like, once more the merging was masterful – the braised baby gem a masterpiece in what may be done with a simple hunk of lettuce. The choice of bread rolls was first rate, and we were drinking the cheapest wine on the list (£22 – got to economise somewhere) – a fresh

and comforting New Zealand Sauvignon (he's very loyal to the old country, is Mr Gordon) called Momo. Jon then went for (deep breath): crispy Middle White pork belly on black pudding, panizza, oloroso soaked raisin and parsley salad and sauteed garlic with mushrooms. Well we've all suffered through a plate of greasy fatty pork belly, but here was not one of them: lean and flavoursome, the skin nice and crisp – and again the whole dish blending superbly, although Jon had said at the outset that he disliked both sherry and raisins: very clever, isn't it?

I was enjoying roast Label Anglais chicken breast with chorizo, leek, courgettes, Japanese strain of beef, marcona almond rosemary dressing and feta poppy seed crisp. The small portion of chicken was not exactly tender, but the depth of deep chicken flavour in its pool of gorgeous, just hot enough, perfectly reduced and bright glossy flame-coloured sauce, was astonishing. Yet once more, the marriage of ingredients and technique was a very happy one. The plates of food were seemingly small, but they did pack a punch. Neither of us had a pudding, although they sounded very fabulously alluring: example – chocolate, orange and wattleseed pastry cream slice with fresh English strawberries and strawberry chilly jelly. Well yum. But but but, the thing is this: we each had a modest, though brilliant, two course lunch, one bottle of the cheapest wine, and no coffee ... and the bill was just shy of £125. So yes, you're going to eat very well here – but first you must answer me this: how rich are you ...?

□ *Summer Things (Faber and Faber £7.99) is a summery novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

No coffee, but plenty of tea at the Palace

TEA is not normally a meal I have truck with – being a lunch and dinner man, there has to be a limit – although I have enjoyed some really good ones fairly recently.

The Wolseley and the Goring Hotel are always wonderful – and while I have never partaken of the legendary tea at the Ritz, I can tell you that its counterpart at Claridge's is simply the most sublime event ever: thoroughly unbeatable in its range of goodies, ambience and the very best service in London.

But last week I took tea somewhere more select even than that: Buckingham Palace. Not, I know, somewhere you can simply pop in on my recommendation – but as

protocol dictates that one is only ever invited to a garden party once in a lifetime, I thought it worth writing about anyway.

The queues to get into the Palace are orderly and quietly excited. A smattering of proper morning dress on the men, but mostly lounge suits that had the air of having been lounged in overnight, and beneath a haystack.

The ladies' outfits were pleasingly overdone, though the larger the lady the larger the floral, as a general rule. Some of the heftiest were only just barely contained by a threatened and potentially disastrous botanical explosion. The main business of the day, of course, is to gawp at Royals (we hit the jackpot

with the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Wales) and so the actual taking of tea is very much secondary. Other guests seemed more intent, though, upon queuing at various ambulances rather bizarrely dotted about the fabulous garden. Women seeking relief from their mad and crippling shoes, largely – though I wouldn't put a few of them past a rapid and impromptu bout of self-harming in order to secure for themselves a Royal Elastoplast, by way of a sweet little keepsake.

There are two tea tents – one for Royals, diplomats, dignitaries, chaps in uniform and chaps in wheelchairs ... and another for the likes of us. There were lots of uniforms, actually

– not just the two bands (whose favourite tunes were the William Tell Overture and the James Bond theme) and the Yeomen of the Guard, but town criers, mayors with chains, cardinals and an admiral or so.

The queue for tea moves remarkably swiftly – they give you an odd long plate like a lozenge with an indentation for a teacup and space for grub. The finger sandwiches were very yummy indeed – ham and piccalilli, cucumber (but of course), egg and another one, can't remember.

Dundee cake properly good (maybe Duchy?) – and then you grab a tub of Loseley ice cream from a cowering cove with a tray of them: he was

frantically mobbed every time he made an appearance and bore in consequence a shy and somewhat hunted air. Now I don't actually drink tea – and they'd run out of coffee, both hot and iced ...! I know – I can hardly believe it either.

Nearly thirty thousand cups of tea they get through, apparently, and although there was plenty of that still sloshing about, not a drop of coffee was now to be had. So at this Tea of Teas, there was I, drinking water.

But still and all, this splendid, curious and rather surreal big day out was utterly and wholly enjoyable. Because look: if ever one is invited to take tea – well then it might as well be here. Right?

