**Café Lapérouse, London: ‘Dismal, expensive, and I had to cadge bread from the next table’ – restaurant review**

I have low expectations of spendy London restaurants, and this one lives down to them

**Café Lapérouse, Courtyard, The Old War Office, 7 Horse Guards Avenue, London SW1A 2EX (**[**laperouse.com**](https://laperouse.com/en/)**). Starters £19-£120, mains £22-£80, desserts £14-£22, Wines from £70**

In the 1940s, the Old War Office building on London’s Whitehall was where the British high command prosecuted their war against the Nazis. Now, as a newly opened Raffles hotel, it’s where the diners may end up feeling like the enemy. It’s been renamed the OWO, which is also the sound you may make on receipt of a bill for eating at Café Lapérouse, one of nine restaurants planned for the building. It is part of a recent boom in bizarrely expensive, glitz-crusted, caviar-drenched money-spaffers in the centre of town: places like [Bacchanalia](https://bacchanalia.co.uk/) just off Berkeley Square, and the trio of offerings at the newly opened [Peninsula Hotel](https://www.peninsula.com/en/default) at Hyde Park Corner. It suggests that in Mayfair and St James’s right now there is no cost-of-living crisis. I have no intention of working my way around them all. I have some self-respect. But it’s worth enduring one of them to remind ourselves just how much fun your money won’t buy you.

The [menu](https://hapi.mmcreation.com/hapidam/f79b4bd7-7697-4d42-abaf-916e123211fe/CAFE%CC%81LAPE%CC%81ROUSE-LONDRES-WEB_compressed-3.pdf.pdf?size=) at Café Lapérouse bears a French legend that roughly translates as, “Café owner to the king since 1776.” Up to a point. There is a famed Parisian restaurant called Lapérouse, which has changed ownership many times since it first opened in the 18th century. It is now controlled by the Moma Group. In 2021, they opened the first Café Lapérouse in the Place de la Concorde as a diffusion line, but I suppose “depuis 2021” doesn’t quite have the same ring about it. Still, you may prefer to try that one because for the most part Paris is cheaper than London, although these things are relative. In Paris the pâté en croute is €16. In London it is £29. In Paris the black truffle rigatoni is €48. In London it is £58. You get the idea. It is clumsily framed comfort food for wealthy people whose problems couldn’t be solved by expensive therapy.

The London outpost is housed in a silvery, free-standing pavilion in the central courtyard, which looks as if it’s been fashioned from a fancy 1970s biscuit tin. Inside, there’s a central round bar plastered with faux scallop shells and bamboo, combined with a swirly floral carpet. The vibe is a Trader Vic’s Tiki Bar meets your nan’s overheated front room in Penge. Young people’s music is so loud the bass vibrates your lower colon, the lights are low enough to demand your smartphone torch and the cheapest bottle of wine is £70, for something available retail for £16. It’s also cramped. We are given a tiny table so close to the waiters’ station that various well-tailored arses regularly loom over my companion’s shoulder. Despite this proximity, we wait an age for each course to be cleared, although the waiters are always friendly while doing so.

I start with the snails in the shell “Lapérouse style”. It turns out their style is to be extremely mean with the garlic butter, which is the whole point of eating snails. You mop it up with the bread. Hang on. Where is the bread? None is offered. Apparently, I must order that, at £5 a pop. Here’s the problem. The pavilion has no kitchen. It’s across the courtyard in the main building. This means two things. First, that almost everything arrives less than hot. And second, that nothing comes quickly. I end up cadging bread from the next table. Our other starter is a French onion soup for £19. The crouton is stodgy, soggy and dense. Underneath that is a bowl of soft onions. The soup element is missing in action. What’s bizarre is that London has restaurants like [Bouchon Racine](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2023/jan/15/bouchon-racine-london-i-am-a-huge-dribbling-admirer-restaurant-review) and [Les 2 Garçons](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2022/may/22/jay-rayner-restaurant-review-les-2-garcons-london-designed-for-your-comfort-zone), which do these classic dishes brilliantly, at a fraction of the cost. The people behind Café Lapérouse should get out more.

Nothing improves at the main course. A blue lobster tagliolini has a bitter back taste as if someone threw in a glug of harsh booze and forgot to cook it off. It costs £59. A chicken breast in a cream and morel sauce is dull, spongy and lifeless. If it was served at a hotel conference dinner in Newbury, you’d congratulate the kitchen for getting all the servings out on time. Matchstick fries aren’t. They are just fries, rather than the crisp twigs meant by the words “pommes allumettes”. Mash is overly salted.

For dessert there’s a chocolate soufflé for £22 listed with the words “depuis 1766”. Are they really saying this chocolate soufflé has been served for more than 250 years? The staff can’t quite answer that. It arrives surprisingly quickly. It’s less surprising when I get inside, because the mix is still cold at the bottom and much of it is uncooked. The sponge for the rum baba is made with what tastes like sweetened pond water. Bang goes another £14. Was any of this really surprising? Well yes and no. Long experience of spendy London gives me low expectations, but I’m always sweetly surprised that these places manage to live down to them so spectacularly. What’s truly extraordinary is the other people who come here, the ones ready to spend their money so casually on such a dismal offering. Our final bill is £353.05.

Talking of the weirdness of expensive restaurants, in August I wrote about an impressive tasting menu at superstar chef Yannick Alléno’s [Pavyllon](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2023/aug/06/jay-rayner-restaurant-review-pavyllon-london-lick-the-plate-delicious) at the Four Seasons on Park Lane. Mostly, I wrote about the fire alarm that blared for minutes on end through the meal. I explained that at the end of lunch when I asked for the bill, I was told the whole restaurant had been comped because of the alarm. Fair enough. A couple of weeks ago I was contacted by someone who was also there that day and had only just read my review. I was lucky, he said, because he got charged. Here was a copy of his bill.

I took this up with the Four Seasons. After a bit of to-ing and fro-ing they told me that seven people had been comped that lunchtime and eight had not, mostly because they declined the offer. That’s odd. I declined, too. I insisted I had to pay. The restaurant insisted back that nobody was paying. I took that on trust. As to my correspondent, the restaurant said their bill was raised before they had taken the decision to comp everyone. The end result is that, albeit inadvertently, it appears I misled the readers of this column. Hence, I pass it all on in the interests of full disclosure.