# Cavo, London: ‘The emptiest of empty vessels’ – restaurant review

It promises a Mediterranean culinary odyssey, but right now Cavo is just a trip to nowhere

**[Cavo](https://cavorestaurant.com/), The Now Building, Outernet, Denmark Street, London WC2H 0LA. Sharing plates £13-£28, grilled dishes £19-£90, cheesecake £9, wines from £35**

When you immediately feel sorry for the staff, you know something is up. At Cavo my sympathy hydrant is fair gushing from the off. Skilled professionals have turned up to work in a restaurant the size of a Swindon call centre, only with more glassware and napery. And it’s empty. It occupies a yawning fourth-floor space in the golden Vegas edifice that is the Now Building, a name which feels like a declaration of high-fashion intent as scripted by Charlie Brooker. It’s part of the Outernet development, on the corner of London’s Charing Cross Road. Deep in the basement there’s a 2,000-capacity music venue. At ground level there’s some weird cavernous, open-sided space clad in 8K screens filled with trippy images that gently morph into adverts for WeTransfer. Stand there for long enough and you will hate yourself.

And there’s Cavo. Slip through the doorway round the back. A tragically bored-looking soul checks your name, punches a lift button and then, oh God, gets in the lift with you, because you clearly cannot be trusted to exit a lift by yourself. The talk is vanishingly small. The lift is claustrophobic. But hang on, we are here now. Another person is furiously checking our name on the system, even though we are likely the only booking and will indeed be the only two people eating in a space which can seat 240. The ceiling is clad in industrial ducting. There are hefty riveted girders painted black. There’s a chiller cabinet full of ageing beef. The open kitchen houses desperate-looking chefs.

We are led to a window table with a “lovely view”. And it does indeed have a view, straight down Tottenham Court Road to that neo-brutalist building on the corner of Great Russell Street. It’s not exactly the Bay of Naples, but what can you do? Ah, here’s our waiter who is charming and efficient, and cursed with having to tell us, with great solemnity, that we are about to be taken on “A Mediterranean Culinary Odyssey”. According to the [lunch menu](https://cavorestaurant.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CAVO-Master-Lunch-Menu-March-2023-2.pdf) we will experience the “authentic next chapter in Mediterranean cuisine”. As against the inauthentic one, which presumably might involve chicken tikka masala, lapdancing and tequila slammers. You can have that restaurant concept for free.

Faced by all this weird, echoing emptiness it is obviously easy to be sarky. That doesn’t mean it’s the wrong thing to do. Cavo is profoundly odd. It must have cost millions to open, and yet it really is empty. The owner is one Emanuil Lazarov, a colourful Bulgarian construction business boss, who it seems had his Sofia restaurant [smashed up](https://www-standartnews-com.translate.goog/balgariya-krimi/mutrenskite-besove-v-beso-399434.html?_x_tr_sl=el&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en-US&_x_tr_pto=wapp) in 2019 in what was reported as a [dispute over fees](https://www-standartnews-com.translate.goog/balgariya-krimi/stroitel-i-khora-na-khamstera-zakopchani-za-pogroma-v-beso-399283.html?_x_tr_sl=el&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en-US&_x_tr_pto=wapp). No such dramas here. Cavo first [announced](https://www.restaurantonline.co.uk/Article/2022/10/10/Vast-Mediterranean-restaurant-CAVO-to-open-on-Tottenham-Court-Road) it was unlocking the doors last autumn and then didn’t. It eventually launched a month before my visit for a quiet soft opening, then closed again “to sort a few things out”, and reopened a week before my lunch. Happening beats boom through the room, punctuated by a hooting klaxon of the sort you might hear just before they close the blast doors in a nuclear shelter.

But let’s get down to that authentic next chapter in Mediterranean cuisine. In the evenings there’s a raw bar offering things like a dozen oysters for £58, followed by “sharing plates and tapas”, which romp around the shores of the Med from Morocco to Turkey to Spain, like a shuttle diplomat trying to stop a war. It includes scallops and champagne butter with chilli, attributed to that bit of the Med abutting, er, Normandy. Next come some seriously spendy meat and fish dishes. At lunchtime, however, there’s just four appetisers at £9, four salad and pasta dishes at £15 and five grills at £23, one of which isn’t available. Hell of an odyssey.

It’s all nice enough even if presented rather desperately on moon-grey plates and lumps of timber. Artichoke hummus arrives vertically impaled with shards of crisp flatbreads. It looks like a model of one of those quarries that Doctor Who used as an alien planet location in the 70s. A splodge of underpowered harissa on the chickpea rubble could be where one of the baddies spilled their guts. It’s an OK hummus. The artichoke element seems to be the scattered deep-fried petals. What’s advertised as a seafood salad contains nothing but lobster. I should be overjoyed. Instead, I can’t help wondering if they are trying to empty the fridge due to lack of demand. The most rewarding item is interleaved discs of aubergine, courgette and potato roasted in a terracotta pot over a stew of tomatoes, topped by whipped feta. It’s plated up prettily to look a little like the title dish in the movie classic [*Ratatouille*](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/oct/12/animation.bradbird).

Three carabinero prawns for £23 are dry and overcooked. And then there’s the tagliata, which should be a steak, grilled, sliced up and laid on a bed of foliage so that the juices can soak into them. This arrives on a thick wooden chopping board, as if put together for a Sainsbury’s Magazine photoshoot about relaxed weekends in the Cotswolds while wearing Boden. It looks like a big board of salad, because they’ve hidden the steak underneath it. Eventually we find the meat and it is a good piece of well-cooked cow. But the absolute standout item? The so-called Greek chips that are either very thin scalloped potatoes or very thick crisps, deep-fried then salted and pelted with fistfuls of dried oregano. I could eat a lot of those. They are soon to open a roof top terrace and I could imagine coming back here for a bowl of those and a cocktail. Though not a Tiramisu Martini, which sounds like a dreadful thing to do to a martini and, to be fair, to a tiramisu.

We are asked if we’d like dessert. I say yes. Our waiter says, “Being a new restaurant we do not have a dessert menu. We have Basque cheesecake.” OK, we’ll have that then. It comes drenched in a Film Fun strawberry compote which makes it look like a murder scene as directed by Tarantino. It’s a nice enough cheesecake. The cooking at Cavo isn’t terrible, but for the price, which this lunchtime was £65 a head without any booze, it is utterly unremarkable and at times just plain peculiar. Successful restaurants need a purpose. Right now, I have no idea what Cavo, the emptiest of empty vessels, is for.