

Dinner is served... shame you can't see it

Welcome to Dans Le Noir, the restaurant where no one wants to be seen. **Richard Alleyne** reports on dining in the dark

JOHN TAYLOR



Customers line up in a dimly lit corridor at the newly opened restaurant Dans Le Noir before being escorted into the darkened room for their dinner. The food was not what our reporter thought it was, and some made a meal of eating it in the blackness

WANT to see the menu? Well you can't. Pass the bread? You must be crazy. And don't even think about trying to fill your own wine glass.

Welcome to Britain's latest and most bizarre dining experience, a restaurant where you eat in complete darkness.

Sounds like a recipe for disaster. But Dans Le Noir, proud to be a place not to be seen in, believes that the experience will heighten your senses and liberate your taste buds, leaving you with a different appreciation of food. Oh and it's also a good place for a blind date, apparently.

The concept, taken from a suc-

cessful restaurant in Paris, is at odds with the traditional dining experience. Customers have no idea what they are eating, where they are sitting or what the dining room looks like. If they are in a small party they may even have no idea who they are sitting next to.

All needs are catered for by partly-sighted or blind waiters, who serve the food and wine, guide you to your table and to the lavatory if the need takes you. Anything that might shatter the blackness, such as a mobile phone display or burning cigarette, is forbidden.

"It is a sensual feast," said Edouard De Broglie, the 43-year-

old French entrepreneur behind the £800,000 venture in Clerkenwell, central London. "Your other senses are awakened by the dark. Your nose, fingers, ears make you face the reality of the taste of the food. You are sitting by people you don't know. You don't judge them by your first sight. You talk to them more in the dark, then you find out what they look like later."

The Daily Telegraph visited the restaurant on its opening night to discover the attractions of the "unique human and sensory experience". After a drink in a normally lit lounge, we were linked in single file crocodiles, mostly of six or

eight, a hand on the shoulder of the person in front, and led by Paul, our waiter, through a thick black curtain into the darkness.

At the table, he placed each person behind a chair and then, one by one, we were told to sit down. Paul, who lost his sight to glaucoma four years ago, brought the wine, or at least we think he did, but, whatever, our unbreakable glasses were filled.

My dining companions were Jill, Saffron, Sophie and Simon. All seemed exceptionally nice, though I had no idea what they looked like. I accidentally patted Sophie on the head trying to find where

she was sitting and she returned the compliment by poking me in the eye.

With the absence of eye contact and shyness, the room soon filled with conversation and laughter. It became so loud that one of the waiters ordered people to lower their voices. For a few minutes the dark filled with eerie whispers before again reaching a climax. Paul explained that there was a napkin, knife and fork in front of us. He then disappeared.

You cannot signal your waiter, but calling his name brings him back to your side. In his enthusiasm Paul plonked down a plate in

The menu

Starter

What it tasted like
Strips of smoked salmon and battered prawns.

What it really was
Salmon sashimi with pesto oil, crab spring roll

Main

What it tasted like
Lamb or beef mince moussaka

What it really was
Roasted fillet of barracuda rosemary dauphinois, grilled aubergine, roasted peppers and Asian butter sauce, sweet potato crisps

Dessert

What it tasted like
Pears in raspberry sauce

What it really was
Caramelised apples, Campari syrup, lavender ice cream & coconut biscuit



front of me on the edge of the table. I just caught it before it landed on my lap.

Fumbling with knives and forks and fingers, we scooped what food there was into our mouths. At first I thought my starter was pasta before deciding it was smoked salmon. For the main course I was convinced I was eating moussaka with lamb or beef mince. Later I discovered it was fish.

The dessert was easy, I thought, pears in a raspberry juice. It turned out to be apples with ice cream. Our taste buds may have been aroused, but they were confused. After an hour and a half, we were desperate

to return to the light. Outside, opinions were divided. Claire Hill, 28, a marketing manager from Islington, north London, said: "I enjoyed it, though it won't be replacing my local Italian. I have no idea what I ate. We had a laugh when we tried to pass the bread. You would never think it could be so difficult."

Another guest was not so enthusiastic. He said: "It was interesting but I am not so sure enjoyable. You have to ask why do people want to experience being blind?"

A meal at Dans Le Noir, which serves mainly French food, costs £37 per person.

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