

In the Dark: The blind feed the blind at new Paris restaurant

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Associated Press

PARIS — They tasted like tomatoes, but in the pitch black it was hard to tell. A couple at the next table was obviously struggling with eating blind, too.

"I don't know what it is," came a man's voice in the darkness.

"Oh! That's not good," his lady friend responded.

This is dining in the dark, the concept of a new restaurant in the City of Light that wants diners to know what it's like to be blind.

At "Dans le Noir" — In the Dark — it's not just that the lights are off and curtains closed. Diners sit in a room of inky blackness that the eyes never adjust to. And that's the idea.

"It awakens your other senses," says the restaurant's owner Edouard de Broglie, who is not blind. "It alters your perspective, your relations with others. It shows what happens when you can't see."

Fingertips seek out familiarity, patting the table for a fork, a plate, a hand to hold. The nose perks up to every passing plate. Under cover of darkness, texture and shape take on new importance. One realizes the role sight plays in the joy of eating.

The restaurant comes amid a growing effort to make Paris — which is bidding for the 2012 Olympic Games — more handicapped-friendly.

City Hall has boosted its budget for handicapped aids to \$28 million in 2004, from just \$2.5 million in 2000. A massive overhaul to make sports stadiums, cultural sites and public transport more accessible to the handicapped is planned over the next decade.

A fleet of handicapped-accessi-

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ble taxis also is starting at the end of this month.

A cinema for the blind and deaf opened Wednesday in the Left Bank. It shows French films with subtitles for the hearing impaired. For the blind, wireless headsets dictate on-screen action between the dialogue ("She gets out of the taxi." "Her hair is tied back in a loose bun.") Guide dogs are welcome.

A blind woman who attended the opening said she felt like she was given the gift of sight.

"I was so happy," said Maudy Piot, who runs an association for the rights of handicapped women. "I felt like a regular person. I saw a film I would never have been able to see before."

Piot, like others in the blind community, has mixed feelings about the restaurant. She says some blind people call it exploitation of a handicap to make money, or tasteless voyeurism.

"But, it's extremely important," she said. "Even if it's only for a limited time, people with sight can understand our anxiety."

The 55-seat restaurant, which opened in July on a street beside the Pompidou Center museum, draws a diverse crowd that comes for a variety of reasons.

An American tourist who is progressively going blind went for the experience of total darkness, and to show his wife what life eventually will be like for him.

"This is a great place," said Mike Sahyun, a 34-year-old software developer from Minneapolis. "She gets to see what it's like for me."

In the dark, diners meet a world with no shapes that is full of voices. The kindness of strangers is crucial.

Blind waiters serve as guides, leading diners hand-on-shoulder from the lighted entrance bar through a series of black curtains to tables. Cell phones, watches and other objects that produce light are checked at lockers in the lobby. Smoking is not permitted.

Pretensions, etiquette and vanity dissolve in the darkness. Once seated, strangers strike up conversation, seeking the reassurance that comes with hearing and touching what can't be seen.

Try pouring a glass of water. "Stick your finger in the glass until it gets wet," advises a waitress, Celine Dos Santos. The restaurant's seven-person wait staff is registered blind, but its chef can see.

Food arrives with a standard warning that prompts alarm: "Watch the plate. It's hot."

Eating is a challenge. A fork scooped across the plate often comes up empty. Celine advises fighting the temptation to eat with your hands — something a blind person tries to avoid in public. But, lowering the head to the plate seems just fine. Nobody can see.

An infrared camera carried in by a TV crew caught many couples using the darkness to smother each other with affection. The restaurant also has its own infrared security system.

One of the restaurant's aims is to focus the senses of smell and taste. But it's unclear whether that works in the food's favor. Diners can choose from a selection of Provence-style food or opt for a "mystery menu" that, for many, becomes a guessing game.

Prices range from \$35 to \$45 per person, without wine.