

MEANWHILE ■ By Brian E. Zittel

A blind date for dinner

When the waitress showed me to my seat, I stuck my tongue out at her. Then I made some silly faces at my friends. When the food came, I ripped into the meat, gravy and vegetables with my fingers. I behaved, in short, like a child who thinks nobody can see him. In this case, nobody could.

Two friends and I were dining in pitch darkness, or "dans le noir," as the French say — which was also the name of the restaurant. The concept behind this popular new eatery in Paris's 4th Arrondissement is for the seeing to experience what it's like to be blind — all with the help of a very patient blind wait staff.

We entered Dans le Noir through a lighted bar area, which seemed quite normal except for the lockers where we put our cellphones and anything else that gave off light. We checked out the chalkboard menu and placed our orders before the blind server took us behind a door cloaked in a black curtain.

We were told to put our hands on the shoulder of the person in front and to follow the blind waitress down the hall. We plunged into utter darkness.

Almost immediately, the childishness set in: We giggled in anticipation and heard laughing in the dark. The other voices got closer, but I couldn't tell exactly how close. It felt like I was taken back in time to a carnival, wending through a haunted house. I tried to imagine Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the prime minister of France, shuffling through with his bodyguards, as he was reported to have done recently. But nobody saw him.

Reaching our table, we were told to stay put until the server helped us into a seat. "How will I ever do this?" I asked myself until I realized I was doing it. I could hear, almost feel, the crowded room. The restaurant is sup-

posed to seat 55, but who knows how many places there were? Maybe we were alone, I thought. Maybe all the voices were just on audiotape.

Our waiter had some tips: When pouring a beverage, keep a finger in the glass, to feel when it's full. Great advice, but don't count on avoiding spills. As for the food, before we knew it, we were shoving it in our mouths by hand. It wasn't pretty — or at least it would not have been had anyone seen it.

If you know what you ordered, the meal is less of a challenge. For the daring, the restaurant offers a "surprise" option: Guessing what you're eating is part of the fun. I guessed wrong. On my second visit, I shared what I thought was a beef steak with my friend Nancy by ripping it from my mouth and slapping it into her hand. Later, when we paid our bill, I learned that we'd been eating ostrich.

Intimacy comes easily in the dark. We talked about our love lives, which attracted the attention of our neighbors. I lost my initial modesty: If they couldn't see me, they'd never know who I was. The anonymity ended when my friend Nicolas invited a curious neighbor on a date. A blind date, you'd call it.

The restaurant holds special group events — wine tastings, readings and dating mixers — all behind the curtains. They offer opportunities to work on senses other than taste.

Take away one of your senses, it is said, and the others are heightened. Indeed, I focused on taste when I tried to guess what I was chomping on. Yet another sense was aroused when I suddenly felt liquid dripping on my leg (wine). Everyone talked much louder — and once in a while I would hear a "shhhhhhhh." A waiter? Who knows?

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