

## [The Review]: Ultraviolet

By [Justin Fischer](#), Jun 28th, 2012 | In [Dining](#)



Portrait by [Scott Wright](#) of [Limelight Studio](#). See more [here](#).

*The Review* is exactly that, a review, a thorough and critical look at newly-opened eateries, your guide to what's hot and what's not around Shanghai. To see our review guidelines, click [here](#).

Three years ago, Paul Pairet told me about some grandiose vision that he'd been kicking about in his head: a restaurant that not only cooks dinner, but provides a full-on sensory experience. "Don't all restaurants do that?" I wondered to myself. As if he'd heard my question, he said, "You see, when you order a sea bass, you will be sitting next to the sea. You will be smelling the ocean. You will be hearing the waves. You will be seeing the water." I'd more or less written it off as a pipe dream, until a couple of years later when he told me, "It's happening." I still didn't quite believe him. And none of the delays that plagued this project inspired much confidence in me either. Even when I was invited to view a rough cut of the dinner, I have to say, I still wasn't entirely convinced. Well, I've experienced [Ultraviolet](#) as a guest, and I'm not only convinced, I am amazed. Amazed at the food, amazed at the production value, and, more to the point, amazed that they were able to pull the whole thing off.



*Dining on the forest floor.*

Long-form degustation dinners are a risky proposition. They can easily devolve into joyless and interminable exercises in pretentious cookery. But when the dining room doors slide open to a fanfare of Richard Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, the theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, you realize that very little here, if anything, is done with a straight face. Pairet takes every available opportunity to crack wise about the stuffy conventions of his trade.

The opening number, for instance, is a frozen communion wafer of wasabi and green apple served to AC/DC's *Hell's Bells*. It's a hilarious jab at the dour solemnity with which so many people approach fine dining.



*Wasabi Green Apple Ostie. "Take this, all of you, and eat."*

Pairet also revels in parody, poking fun at common tropes and current trends. The smallest courses always seem to come out on the most ludicrously over-sized plates. He also takes a pot shot at all of those contemporary chefs who like to make food that looks like dirt (you'll see what I mean when you get to dessert).

Some courses are accompanied by whimsical pastiches of pop-culture, kitsch, and camp, invoking everything from the Beatles to *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*. Other courses, like the "Crunchy Fierce Salad," come with a hefty serving of ham. The lights dim. You can hear a thunderstorm brewing faintly off in the distance. Host and Director Fabien Verdier and his assistant ceremoniously push a trolley to the head of the table. On it sits a salad bowl filled with assorted herbs and greens, a polished silver gravy boat covered with frost and emitting strange wisps of vapor, and some mysterious dome-shaped electronic appliance. The thunder marches closer, rumbling ever louder. Verdier flips a switch on the appliance, and it begins to hum and glow a deep purple. He then stands poised before the salad bowl grasping two salad spoons, his arms stretched to the heavens like lightning rods. Just when the thunder crescendos to a deafening crash, he stabs the spoons into the salad bowl while his assistant pours the steaming contents of the gravy boat over the greens. It's liquid nitrogen. It freezes the salad on contact, and the spoons shatter it all into tiny crunchy shards. Once the storm subsides and Verdier sets down the spoons, the glowing purple dome issues a familiar ding. They flip the canopy open to reveal a soft, gooey wheel of camembert that's been dosed with calvados and truffles. And that's when it dawns on you. It's a microwave, the *bête noir* of any practitioner of haute cuisine. Most wouldn't allow one in their kitchen. And those who would, surely would never admit to it. But Pairet puts his tableside for all to see. Pretty ballsy!



*"Micro Fish no Chips"*

Even during the more understated and seemingly earnest moments of the evening, Pairet's tongue is lodged firmly in his cheek. For the two meat courses -- a rack of lamb studded with sliced black truffles and, as the menu describes it, "engloved" in a glaze of its own juices and a slab of wagyu beef grilled and smoked to perfection over grapevines -- the setting is...well...a restaurant. Dim lights, flickering candles, soothing jazz music, a window peering onto vistas of the Huangpu and the Seine. They literally simulate a restaurant...in a restaurant. How utterly meta.

But all of the in-jokes, all of the flashing lights and bells and whistles belie one simple fact: This is still serious food. Everything that comes to the table is technically flawless, artfully executed and could easily stand on its own. For instance, the "Sea bass Monte Carlo," a tender fillet of sea bass with sun dried tomatoes and fresh mozzarella baked inside a crusty baguette like a beef Wellington, is a loaves and fishes miracle in and of itself. The aquarium scenes and the strains of Debussy swelling in the background almost seem superfluous in its midst.



On top of all this, service is spectacular. Granted, with a server-to-guest ratio of one to one, it damn well better be. But there is more to it than that. You can plainly see these guys are having a good time. In spite of the highly rehearsed formalities, everyone -- from the guy who cooks your "Suzette Carrot Cake" to the guy who pours your wine is having fun. Even Pairet works the room, periodically breaking down the fourth wall with a wise crack or two. The fun is infectious.

So is it worth shelling out the 2000 kuai? Absolutely. Move past the sticker shock, and just do the math in your head. For this price, you get 20 courses, 12 of which are paired with wine or beer, or a cordial, and you get a nightcap when it's all over. There are restaurants in this city commanding close to that for a measly four-course wine dinner. And I can assure, not one of them will provide the same unforgettable experience you'll get here. So do what you've got to do. Take fewer taxis. Order less delivery food. Scavenge all of that pocket change that's fallen between the sofa cushions. Save up all of those maos and book your seats. They're not available for the next few months. You've got plenty of time.

