

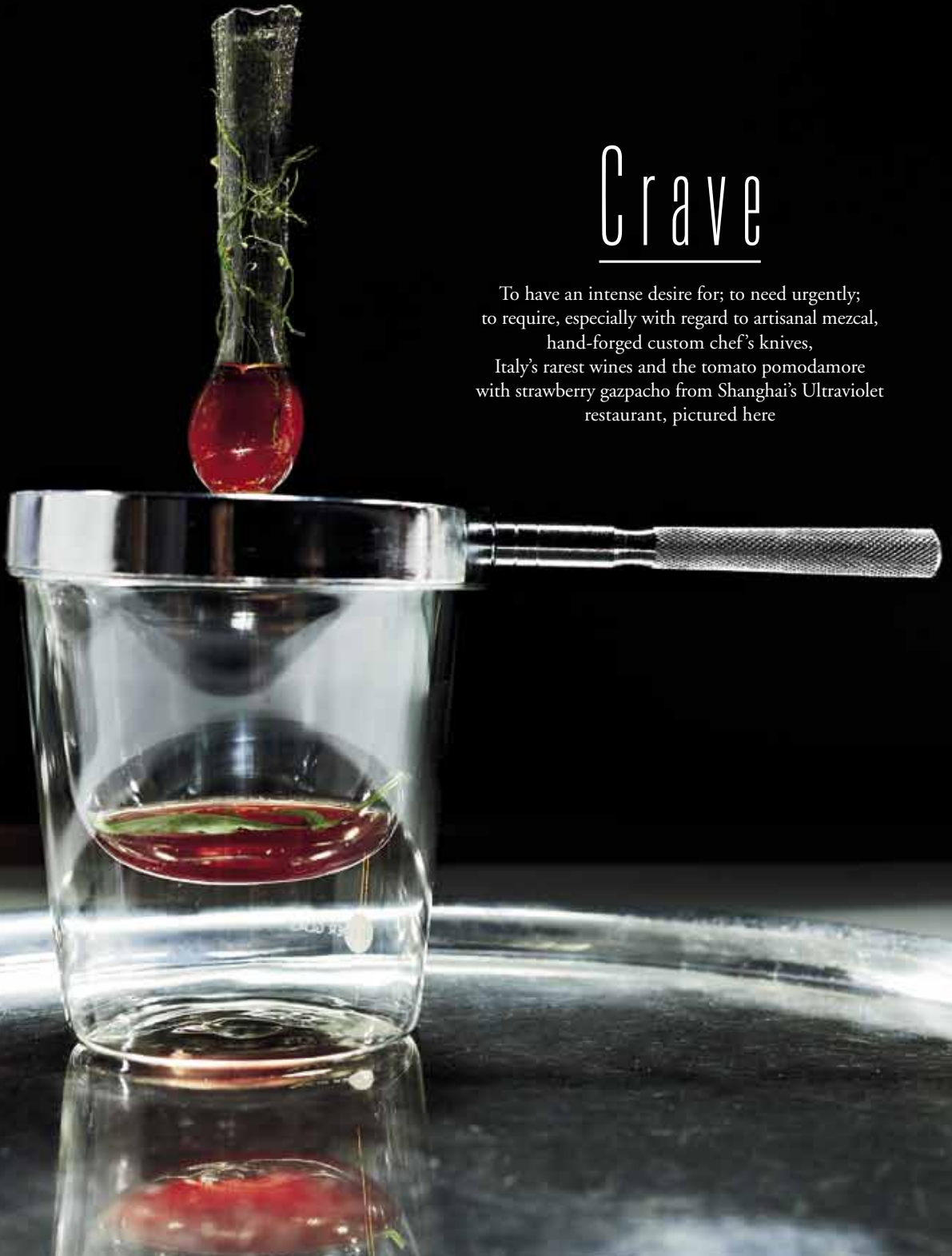
BLACK INK

THE ART OF EXTRAORDINARY LIVING • FALL/WINTER 2012

Crave

To have an intense desire for; to need urgently;
to require, especially with regard to artisanal mezcal,
hand-forged custom chef's knives,

Italy's rarest wines and the tomato pomodamore
with strawberry gazpacho from Shanghai's Ultraviolet
restaurant, pictured here





Ultraviolet's kitchen is only a few feet away from the dining room; the restaurant's nondescript entrance (opposite).



In a Different Light

At Ultraviolet restaurant, in an undisclosed location in Shanghai, it's not just wines paired with the food—it's sounds and smells and visuals. And this is how chef Paul Pairet creates an alternate reality for ten guests at a time.

Text by Alexander Chee

Photographs by Andrew Rowat

I FLEW TO SHANGHAI FROM NEW YORK for dinner. My seatmate on the flight was a Shanghai financier, elegant even as her toddler daughter crawled over her. I asked her if she had any favorite restaurants. "I've been living in the States four years now," she said. "I'm sure they're all closed." When I looked surprised at this, she shrugged with a smile and said, "In Shanghai, we like the new. Do you have any reservations?"

"One," I said. "Ultraviolet."

"I have not heard of this," she said.

I told her what I knew: One table, ten seats, and you must reserve approximately two to three months in advance, though the restaurant has been open only since May. Dinner is a set menu of 22 courses, each dish presented along with a distinct visual landscape and soundscape. On the day you make your reservation, you're told where

“If I were to charge what the meal costs,” Pairet says, “it would probably come to \$6,000 or \$7,000 a person.”

to meet and the time, and from there you are taken in a shuttle to the secret location. The chef, Paul Pairet, is French but had come into his own in Shanghai with two restaurants there, and this was his newest project.

She wrote it down before I was done describing it.

I arrived at the meeting point a few hours later for dinner number 80. There was a man in our party returning for his second time.

My seatmate was the only person I met in Shanghai who didn't know the chef. Anyone else, if they knew Shanghai and I said I'd come for dinner, guessed right away: “Paul Pairet.”

THE MEET POINT, THE DETAILS OF WHICH are secret, consisted of a long black lacquer table surrounded by black lacquer chairs. As we entered, we were offered a glass of Eric Bordelet's Poiré Granite, a light sparkling cider. In front of each of us was a little, translucent folded paper square printed with the letters *UVA* and held together with a butterfly clip, looking like the map to a rave. When we were all there, a pale young Frenchman appeared, dressed in black, his dark hair shoulder length. He grinned and said, “Welcome to Ultraviolet! I am Fabien Verdier, the director for the evening.” Verdier is Pairet's lieutenant. He has been with the chef since Jade on 36, Pairet's first restaurant in Shanghai, but he wears his stature lightly.

The man returning for his second meal was Australian. He'd brought a guest, a young woman unused to the idea she could not change the menu.

Verdier invited us downstairs, where the shuttle waited. I tried to make sense of our direction, but I noticed only that we had passed into old Shanghai, over Suzhou Creek, somewhere north of the Bund, the streets thronged with so many noodle shops and dumpling places, they seemed to light the way. We finally stopped at the service entrance to a crumbling building.

Despite outward appearances, Ultraviolet is quite sturdy and new on the inside. Located in a former recording studio, with a roof rebuilt twice to get it right, it is like a Porsche engine disguised in an antique Volkswagen bus.

We entered and found ourselves in front of something that looked like a freight elevator at the end of a short corridor. Verdier clasped his hands together. “I'm going to leave you now. Please, go and wait by the door there. It will open, and you will follow the lights to the next doors. Just keep turning toward the lights.”

We did as we were told. The doors behind us closed. A seam of light appeared to the right, and we turned toward that, and the doors opened. We walked into another, larger room, something of

a foyer. Another seam of light appeared, and we turned toward that. The door lifted, gliding up.

I noticed I was holding my breath.

The mythic one table and ten seats looked like the bridge to a space ship in some 1970s science-fiction film. They were white but lit with blazing blue and purple lights. On the table, our names glowed in white letters at each seat, though the table itself was as empty as a screen. I sat down to find my chair adjustable ergonomically. Verdier reappeared, grinning. “I see you made it in,” he joked. “Please adjust your seats so you are comfortable. There will be ten courses and an intermission.” The door that had opened for us slid shut, Verdier stepped back and the room went dark.

Stars began to appear, moving along the wall as if we were rising or they were falling, and my ears began to pop a little. Soon it was as if the sky were racing away. Is that the *Apollo 13* recording, I wondered briefly, before the “Houston, we have a problem” line comes on?

The message was clear: We'd left earth behind. We were in Paul Pairet's world now.

The fantasy for Pairet began as a psychic refuge from the complications of a large menu and a big room at the restaurant Mr & Mrs Bund, which he opened in 2009. He wanted to see what could happen if he reduced the number of variables—thus, ten people, one table, one menu. The publicity materials for Ultraviolet say it was a dream of his 15 years in the making—it was a young chef's dream then, only possible now for him as a master, and only in Shanghai. The Shanghainese aren't looking for cooking that is as good as, say, the French cuisine they might remember from trips to Paris. Shanghai's mix of new money and adventurous spirit means its citizens are instead inviting the best people from Paris, from all over the world for that matter, to come and do something they couldn't do anywhere else. The nomadic Pairet, who had cooked previously in Paris, Hong Kong, Sydney, Jakarta and Istanbul, was a perfect candidate. **In Shanghai they like the new. And that is exactly what Pairet is giving them.**

THE FIRST IMPULSE IN DESCRIBING THE *UVA* dinner at Ultraviolet is to try and summarize the different dishes, but it's not possible, and it would miss the point. The second course was when I understood this.

My server set down a red fruit “cigarette” filled with foie gras and resting in a gleaming silver ashtray made for this presentation by the French company Ercuis. I resisted the impulse to slip the dish into my pocket; it inspired a certain covetousness. A pile of ash—cabbage ash—sat beneath the tip. On the wall behind it in my line of sight, the



Sous-chef Frederic
Robert portions
Wagyu beef with
surgical precision.



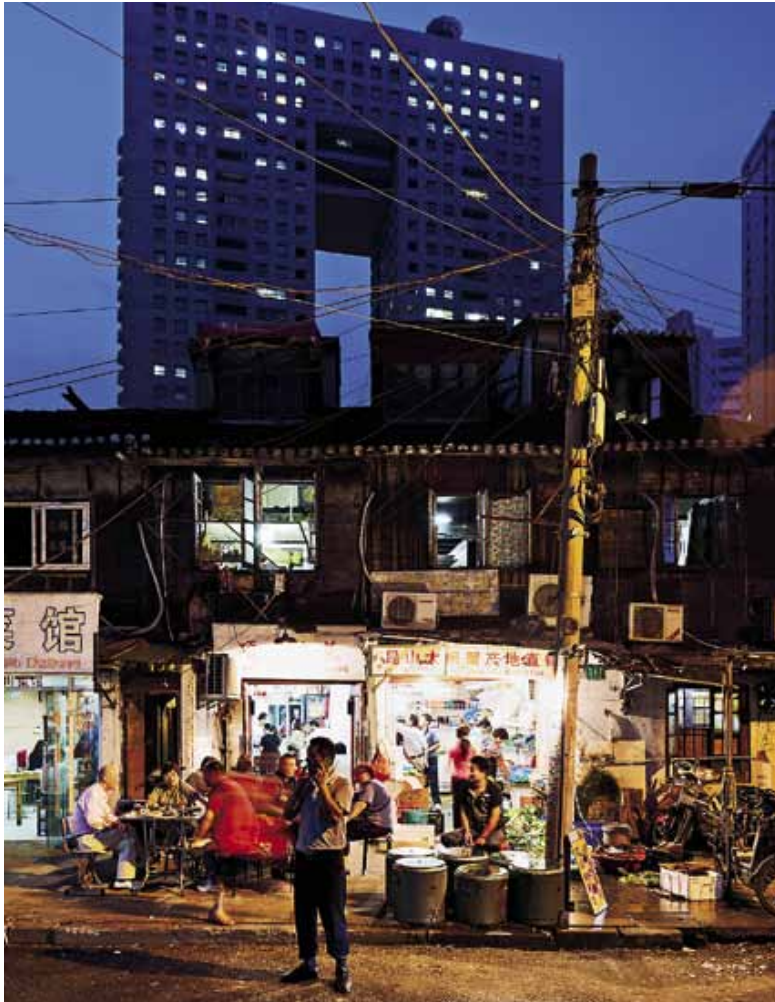


image of an enormous cigarette burned, the smoke wavering and rising while Ennio Morricone's "Man with a Harmonica," pure Charles Bronson spaghetti-western music, trilled.

This was a standoff and a seduction both.

Foie Gras Can't Quit, it's called. And there's an intensity to it—it's more than just a beautiful joke. To pick up the cigarette, push it into the ash and take a bite, this goes against all the habits you might have, whether or not you smoke.

I took a sip of the sherry, let it linger in my mouth, picked up the cigarette, brushed it into the ash, put it in my mouth and bit. The cigarette snapped crisply, the ash flavor was first, making an earthy, even bitter coating before the sweetness of the fruit and the salty creaminess of the foie gras. All this against the sherry's almond finish.

The silver dish and the temptation that I felt to steal it were taken away, and as the doors closed behind the server, the room began to alter again.

NO DISH MOVED ME MORE THAN THE modestly named Bread. A favorite snack of Pairet's as a young chef was bread dipped in meunière sauce, and some form of this dish has traveled with him through all his restaurants.

This arrived tableside under a glass dome. On the plate is a finger of bread covered in a white foam cape, with truffles hidden beneath the foam. As the server removes the dome, he turns it to face you, and the scent of a freshly burned tobacco leaf escapes—it is trapped back there in the kitchen.

"In three or four bites," my server said. I nodded, happy to take my time as the tobacco smell began to fade. The foam cape to the taste was meunière, but the bread had been soaked in the sauce as well. It was delicate and hearty both, the sauce made by Pairet with butter and lemon and a bit of soy.

After the puns and jokes of the other dishes, all of which I loved, this seemed deeper. As I bit down, I could see the tired young man he'd been, at work late in the restaurant and a little hungry, could see him in the kitchen action, taking something burned, something that no one would eat, and dipping it in the sauce to find a deep satisfaction in it. He would have been worn out by the demands of an a la carte restaurant. It was a profoundly organized and also deeply transcendent dish, simple and subtle. It was pure autobiography. *Continued*

Clockwise from top left: The beginning of the dinner journey; the Engloved Truffle lamb; the streets of Ultraviolet's neighborhood; the last dish of the meal, Ispahan Dishwash with Ispahan rose and lychee foam; visuals for a course with a Picasso theme; director Fabien Verdier and assistant manager Louis Wang perform quality control on every single plate.

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Pairet's often been compared in the press and food blogs to the famous Ferran Adrià, a chef Pairet does claim as an influence. But to go expecting something like El Bulli would miss the point.

Think of Proust's beginning to *Remembrance of Things Past*, the famous description of a memory from childhood, of a madeleine cookie he loved. Imagine a chef with Ferran Adrià's applied scientific methods, then, so that he could make you a kind of madeleine trompe l'oeil out of something unexpected that still retains the qualities of a madeleine. Then he invites in a sound artist and a video artist and adds to it a short film experience of Proust and the madeleine that plays around you as you eat it, along with a scent created by the fragrance house Mane expressly for this. Say he does this 22 times, for all the courses, to make something in chapters, a dinner that is also a story, presented in one evening at a table that is also a screen, in a room with 56 speakers, four dry scent diffusers and seven high-res video projectors, all run from a control room, so that as you eat, the dish isn't just on the Sieger by Furstenberg china. The dish is all around you. Paul Pairet, if anything, is trying to reverse-engineer a Proustian experience for you in real time.

That is Ultraviolet.

AFTER INTERMISSION, WE RETURNED TO find the table handsome in a dove-gray tablecloth set with a silver candelabra—the bare setting of the first half replaced by a more normal *mise en place*. Verdier called it a reverse *mise en place*, the table starts empty and becomes fuller toward the end.

"This portion of the meal is called Bourgeois," Verdier said, gesturing at the decor that had arrived. And it was Bourgeois, beautifully so: The new napkin waiting for you is pulled from a silver ring. A tray with an array of custom-made Laguiole knives was presented for us to choose one for the coming Wagyu Simple steak and the Engloved Truffle lamb—and again I felt the lust of wanting to own the one I chose.

The last dish of the night was something called the Ispahan Dishwash, brought out on what looked like a room-service tray left in a hotel kitchen. The food appeared partly eaten, a glass was turned on its side as if spilled. A bowl was full of what looked like dish foam, with the handle of a whisk protruding.

It's one last trompe l'oeil. The foam is lychee and Ispahan rose. There's whipped cream along the whisk. The spilled glass is a watermelon drink. I ate it all, licking the whisk at the end as Grace Jones sang "La Vie en Rose" and a film of dish-washing and suds filled my vision.

We applauded at the end of the meal as the *Love Boat* theme played and credits ran on the kitchen

wall, like the end of a movie. But as the rest headed out to the bar for a last glass of Champagne, I went to ask Pairet some questions, as I'd never met a chef who wanted to tell me a story.

IN HIS MODERN OFFICE OVER HIS VAST AND very clean kitchen, complete with a fire pole he can use to descend quickly for fun or emergencies, we had gin and tonics and talked. In person, Pairet is tall and lanky, his trademark worn green cap almost always on his head, and his eyes look to be as black as his hair. He's magnetic even when he's tired after a long night—and as a man with two hot restaurants of different kinds and a wife and a young child, no one knows how he gets by.

Pairet explained how previous to now he has worked to push an element in his food to precise extremes and varying processes to arrive at something he isn't even sure is there. "I have 99 percent failure, 1 percent success," he said of it. And should he go past the mark, it's not always bad—for then he approaches anything he destroys from another angle. He has a singular devotion to a result even he can't quite imagine until he has it, and he will do anything it takes to get there. His commitment to the process is such that his efforts at Ultraviolet are made possible only by his backers, the VOL Group, and the Ultraviolet corporate partners, listed on the website. "If I were to charge what the meal cost in terms of the research and the rest," he said, "it would probably come out to \$6,000 or \$7,000 a person." (The actual cost is \$320.)

He closed with a long story of how one of the desserts, the Gummy Hibernus Coke Rocks, had been partly inspired by watching his three-year-old son try Coca-Cola for the first time and find it instantly delicious.

I wasn't able to get him to speak about the deeper story of the whole dinner, but as I went over my notes that night, I saw I had been acting like the reader who tries to get the author to tell him what his book is about when he's just finished reading it.

The first part of the dinner was discovery, explorations pushing out at the edges of space and the ocean, distant fields. The second, the one Verdier had joked was Bourgeois, was about making a home after those exploits. Settling down. Dessert was the third—a rediscovery of the pleasures of childhood. It was Pairet's story—the nomadic adventurer who finds a place where he can do the work he loves, and then, through his children's eyes, reinvents the pleasures of his own childhood. Menu as autobiography after all. ♦

To make a reservation, call 86-21/6142-5198 or go to wbypp.cc.



At the end of the meal, the staff stands in appreciation.