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'Multi-sensory dining' sizzles in China

Whiz kid chef Paul Pairet urges Shanghai foodies to spend four hours (and a pile of cash) eating dishes they can barely recognize in an experimental theater

By Julie Levin 27 June, 2012

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Each dish at Ultraviolet by Paul Pairet, as well as the space itself, is designed to be theatrical.

As 10 mad scientists fly around a small laboratory space in a tizzy, putting the finishing touches on their latest creations, 10 equally anxious product testers wait in the adjacent room for the goods to be delivered.

At least, that's how the scene might appear to an outsider at Ultraviolet by Paul Pairet in Shanghai (Ultraviolet in short), the latest of a handful of restaurants around the world using science and technology to transform a meal into a piece of theater.

Words of warning: a meal at the fusion restaurant lasts for four hours and consists of more courses than the PGA tour.

The cost per head is a not-insubstantial RMB 2,000 (US\$314).



Ultraviolet's version of foie gras.

Mysterious food

Billed as the first "multi-sensory" restaurant in China or even the world, Ultraviolet uses sight, sound and smell to enhance the food.

It was established by French chef and restaurateur Paul Pairet, the brains behind several high-end restaurants in Shanghai.

To start, Ultraviolet's dishes are often barely recognizable as food -- the first of the 22 courses on the set menu is a coin-sized neon-green disc held by a two-pronged silver utensil, which turns out to be a frozen apple wasabi concoction.

The other notable course is a slender ruby red cigarillo, served with a small mound of cabbage ash. Dip the cylindrical creation into the ash; this is actually creamy foie gras.

Sensory overload

From the appetizers to the main courses of Wagyu beef and sea bass, each dish is designed to assault the senses, with the help of modern technology.

The truffle burnt soup bread, for instance, comes out in a glass case layered under a faint essence of cigar smoke.

A 360-degree projection screen is showing a forest ensconced in a light fog, towering trees with branches stripped bare. The scent is faintly woody. (Fragrances are discreetly being pumped into the room.)

Suddenly, 15 servers emerge in single file from the kitchen, breaking the silence.

By now -- about a quarter of the way through the meal -- we have come to expect the unexpected and hesitate only slightly before complying with the waiters' request to sniff the inside of the glass cover as they remove it from the dish.

The smell is that of a cigar, which somehow makes perfect sense after biting into the bread -- a luxurious, smoky flavor coating the tongue as the memory of the cigar smoke lingers in the nostrils.

“
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Then there is a deconstructed "Fish, No Chips" (a large caper with a very pronounced salinity that's stuffed with an almost sweet-tasting anchovy paste, then deep-fried) served against a soundtrack of heavy rain and a digital Union Jack boldly displayed on the long tabletop.

-- Paul Pairet, partner/founder of Ultraviolet

Cue the upbeat Beatles number "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da" and suddenly the room is transformed to a British pub.

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We later sink our teeth into lobster while soaking in a warm sea breeze courtesy of a circulating pressure cooker.



Ultraviolet goes full-blown Brit for a creative version of fish-and-chips.

Dining as theater

If the food concept here seems unconventional, Ultraviolet's way of receiving guests is more so.

We and the other diners (only 10 each night) meet at [Mr & Mrs Bund](#), Pairet's acclaimed French restaurant on the Bund, for a welcome drink.

An specially designed van then conveys us to an undisclosed location while showing a short mash-up of video clips that is ostensibly intended to clarify the upcoming experience.

In fact, it only further adds to the mystery of Pairet's bold vision for Ultraviolet -- a vision that has taken more than two years and US\$2 million to realize and has been developing in Pairet's head for nearly 15 years.

"I had in mind to make something small, very personal, a home-feel [restaurant] in professional hands," says Pairet. "Like [hosting meals] at home, I'll pick the time, pick the menu, set the music, spark off the lights ..."

The 10-seat Ultraviolet joins a small but growing group of restaurants that are making a radical departure from the world of traditional cuisine, such as [elBulli](#) in Spain (which is no longer operating) and [Ainea](#) and [Moto](#) in Chicago.

These restaurants have embraced odd combinations of alchemically altered ingredients, concocted by methods most often associated with lab science. For example, Ainea is known for delivering dishes on a strange suspended metal wire contraption.

Atour through the kitchen at Ultraviolet reveals lasers and freeze driers among other space-age equipment.



Paul Pairet -- chef, entrepreneur, visionary.

Gimmicky or not?

The cost of the dinner is RMB 2,000 per head. It's a big bet on the part of Paul Pairet that Chinese diners are ready to pay handsome RMB for a meal they don't recognize.

Yan Yan (颜颜), 29, a Shanghai-based journalist, was one of the first to eat in the restaurant.

She says the idea felt a little gimmicky at first, but "once I sank into the restaurant, it was quite an unforgettable experience.

"I actually think the cost is OK for everything that goes into it," says Yan, who earns around RMB 12,000 every month. "I wouldn't go every day, of course, but I think for birthdays or anniversaries it's all right."

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China

Maybe it's the three years of hype, millions of dollars in advertising or the chance to see virtual gummy bears running laps around the restaurant, but every Shanghai foodies seems to want a bite of Ultraviolet.

With just one table of 10 per night, the restaurant is booked straight through the month and is quickly filling up for July.

Book a seat at Ultraviolet by Paul Pairet via its [official website](#).

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