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The light fantastic

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After a meal at the recently opened pop-up Ultraviolet in Shanghai, Brian Johnston reckons he might have found the world's most outlandish and entertaining restaurant.

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Guests are served dinner as a British flag is projected over the table of Ultraviolet in Shanghai.








Guests are served dinner as a British flag is projected over the table of Ultraviolet restaurant in Shanghai. Photo: Reuters

I'm standing on the pavement of The Bund and about to break my mother's rules.







All those years ago she told me never to climb into an unfamiliar car, or go off with a stranger, or allow someone to take me to an unknown destination.

Now I'm about to do all three. As a van pulls up by the roadside, I simply clamber in with a driver I've never seen before. We pull out into the traffic and are soon turning down streets lined with crumbling factory buildings. I've no idea where we're going, but it looks as if it could end up like a scene from CSI: Shanghai.

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A chef hard at work on an Ultraviolet creation. Photo: Reuters

With nine other people, I step out of the van and through a set of double doors. Though a welcome cocktail sits on a plain wooden table, we're all slightly nervous. We appear to be in an abandoned warehouse, and are quite alone. I nearly spill my drink when a metal door suddenly slides open, revealing a long corridor lit by a Baccarat chandelier. We follow it to find a windowless room with red brick walls, where a table is set for 10.

We all sit down, and the magic begins. A church bell rings and angelic voices sing. The brick walls shimmer and disappear, and a starry sky twinkles above. Waiters with heads bowed appear carrying silver bowls. As the first course is set in front of us - a floating green disc of wasabi-frozen apple - a sudden blast of AC/DC makes us all jump.

I'm in Ultraviolet, the latest sensation in Shanghai's fast-changing dining scene. It isn't a permanent restaurant. It has a secret location, and only serves 10 people a night. There's no a la carte menu, just a parade of 22 courses of increasing insanity. All this and a \$300 price tag has made it the talk of the town. Critics have lined up to call Ultraviolet outlandish, unorthodox, "a crazy dream", "a magical mystery tour" and "a play in 22 edible acts".

What's certain is that this is probably the most avant-garde restaurant in the world. Maverick French chef and owner Paul Pairet has called dining at Ultraviolet "a multisensory experience". The walls of the dining room are actually floor-to-ceiling video projection screens. One minute I'm sitting in a forest glade enjoying some truffle bread, next I'm at the bottom of a tropical ocean for a course of sea bass with mozzarella and sun-dried tomatoes. As I tuck into lobster, waves crash around the walls, the air smells salty and seagulls shriek.

Yes indeed, the restaurant doesn't stop at mere video. There's a themed soundtrack too, and wafting smells to accompany my courses. The smells sometimes appear to drift down from ceiling outlets, and are sometimes borne in by waiters under cloches.

One of the more bizarre courses is a cigarette made from foie gras. Waiters release cigar smoke into the air and, on the walls, a huge cigarette tip slowly burns as ash swirls.



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Chef Paul Pairet.

Fabien Verdier is the restaurant director.

Given the unusual molecular gastronomy offerings, he's needed just to explain how the dishes should be eaten. Despite all the theatricality, though, the food is excellent.

Paul Pairet is far from new on the Shanghai dining scene. He's the owner of celebrated chic modern-French eatery Mr & Mrs Bund, and a number of the dishes at Ultraviolet come from its menu.

And while Ultraviolet has created quite a chatter for its avant-garde presentation, the food is quietly praised by the likes of legendary Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse. I have to agree.

A course of softened camembert cheese flavoured with truffle and Calvados is sensational even though I'm initially distracted by the side salad, which has been shattered in front of us with liquid nitrogen as thunder rolls. Two meat courses

(a rack of lamb and smoked wagyu beef) are among the best I've tasted.

To add to the surreal effect, we enjoy these in a normal-looking restaurant space, until I glance out of what appears to be a window and see not Shanghai but Paris.

It's hard to nominate my favourite moment, but for a great blend of taste and entertainment the fish and chips course is very amusing. The surface of the dining table miraculously transforms into a Union Jack, rain runs down the walls, and the Beatles play. The fish and chips turns out to be a deep-fried caper stuffed with anchovy and matched with a Scottish beer: a little morsel that bursts with salty flavour.

It takes four hours to complete the meal and I'm never bored. After we've finished, Verdier gives us a tour of the kitchen and tells us about the state-of-the-art equipment that creates this spectacle.

It's a shame to reveal the trickery behind the wondrous evening, but it's only the slightest of complaints in a night of pure entertainment. If only Fabien Verdier had disappeared in a puff of smoke, it might have been perfect.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

China Eastern Airlines flies from both Sydney and Melbourne to Shanghai. (02) 9290 1148, flychinaeastern.com.

STAYING THERE

Get dizzy at the Grand Hyatt Shanghai, which takes up the 53rd to 87th floors of a Pudong skyscraper, with fine views from Cloud 9 Bar. Rooms from 2000 yuan (\$310). +86 21 5049 1234, shanghai.grand.hyatt.com.

EATING THERE

Ultraviolet has no fixed address. Guests depart from Mr & Mrs Bund, 18 Zhongshan Dong Yi Lu (The Bund). +86 21 6142 5198, uvbypp.cc.

MORE INFORMATION

cnto.org.au

ABOUT THE WRITER

Born in Nigeria of Irish parents, and having lived in Britain, Switzerland and China, Brian Johnston seemed destined to become a travel writer.

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