

FOUR

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Exposed





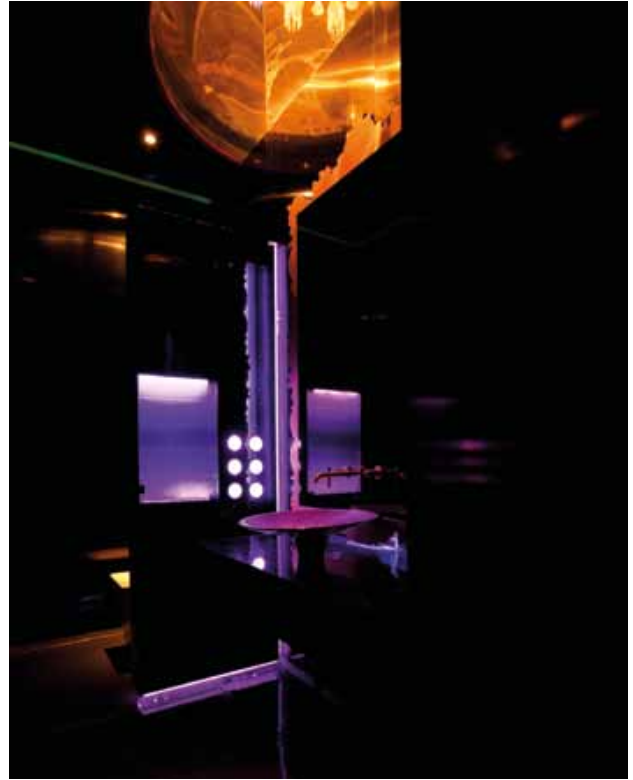


THIS IS NOT A GIMMICK!

To the tune of Chilly Gonzales' 'Carnivalse' and Adele's 'Skyfall,' *Bruce Palling* is absorbed in *Paul Pairet's* multi-sensory dining experience in Shanghai

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT WRIGHT OF LIMELIGHT STUDIO

PAUL PAIRET



China can boast of having the oldest continuous culinary tradition on earth. More than two and a half thousand years ago, the philosopher Confucius laid down very sensible rules for cooking, including: “A man must not eat anything discoloured or [that] smells bad. He must not eat what is overcooked, nor what is undercooked, nor anything that is out of season.”

Numerous generations later, the 12th century Emperor Hui-tung painted an exquisite scroll painting of a handful of scholars seated around a table in a garden with sophisticated plates of food and cups of wine and tea being served.

After countless more rulers, and despite the privations of the Maoist era, it is appropriate that in Shanghai, a similarly sized table serving only 10 guests is now the centrepiece of one of the most extraordinary dining experiences anywhere on the planet.

Ultraviolet is the creation of French-born chef Paul Pairet and is arguably the most well thought-out audio-visual attempt to stimulate, intrigue and complement a feast of 20 dishes along with an unsurpassed selection of fine wines.

Pairet has made Shanghai his home for the past decade, though he trained in leading restaurants in France, Indonesia, Australia and Hong Kong. A burly man who looks more like a left-wing academic than a chef, he was born 50 years ago in Perpignan, France, and claims to be

more Catalan than French: “Our surname is unique to our family as it is a misspelling of pirate,” he says. He didn’t come from a restaurant family, but was inspired by a book on “cuisine grand-mère”, which was given to him as a nine-year-old. He discovered the joys of cooking for other people at summer camp as a teenager. “By accident, I had to cook when the chef had his day off, so I served really pleasurable but unhealthy things like ravioli with cheese, croque-monsieur with too much cheese, extra chocolate for dessert and it was then I realised the power and pleasure of cooking. I received applause from the people and it made me realise that when you are cooking you really can touch people inside.”

A big influence on Pairet’s style was Jose Lampreia of La Maison Blanche in Paris—a flamboyant self-taught chef who attracted foodies and celebrities in the late eighties. After that, he spent more than a decade in Jakarta, Hong Kong, Istanbul and Sydney. In 1996, when the restaurant he worked in was sold, he thought of opening his own restaurant to pursue his ideas of exploring the power of food memories and also of devising a menu accompanied by his favourite music, but couldn’t raise the money.

Shanghai changed all that. He moved there in 2005 and was head chef at Jade on 36 in the Pudong Shangri-La and then in 2009, started his own French restaurant called Mr & Mrs Bund, in the former western quarter of Shanghai, which is also known as the Bund. »

ABOVE Ultraviolet is hidden away at a secret location in an area full of light factories and shop houses next to a nondescript canal.

PAUL PAIRET

« It has won numerous restaurant awards and is No. 76 on the San Pellegrino Top 100 Best Restaurant list, but this was merely a springboard to open Ultraviolet (which is No. 58 on the current list).

Rather than being in a spectacular site with panoramic views, Ultraviolet is hidden away at a secret location in an area full of light factories and shop houses next to a nondescript canal. Guests first meet at Mr & Mrs Bund for a drink and then are shuttled there in a minibus, where they are driven through a gate into a factory that used to house a recording studio. On the journey, guests are given a small package, which includes a tiny folded calling card-size piece of rice paper, which unfolds to the size of a newspaper with all of the dishes and accompanying music printed on it.

The whole concept is the antithesis of a contemporary à la carte restaurant. For a start only 10 guests are served each night, with everyone having the same food and wine pairing. "A la carte is a real luxury for the guest—they can choose from all those different dishes, which are delivered to their table 15 minutes later. I decided to remove this luxury from the guests and give it to the kitchen. This way, you can have precision about when a dish is exactly ready to serve. Take my truffle bread, which takes an hour to prepare, so no one is going to order it as a starter and then hang around for that long."

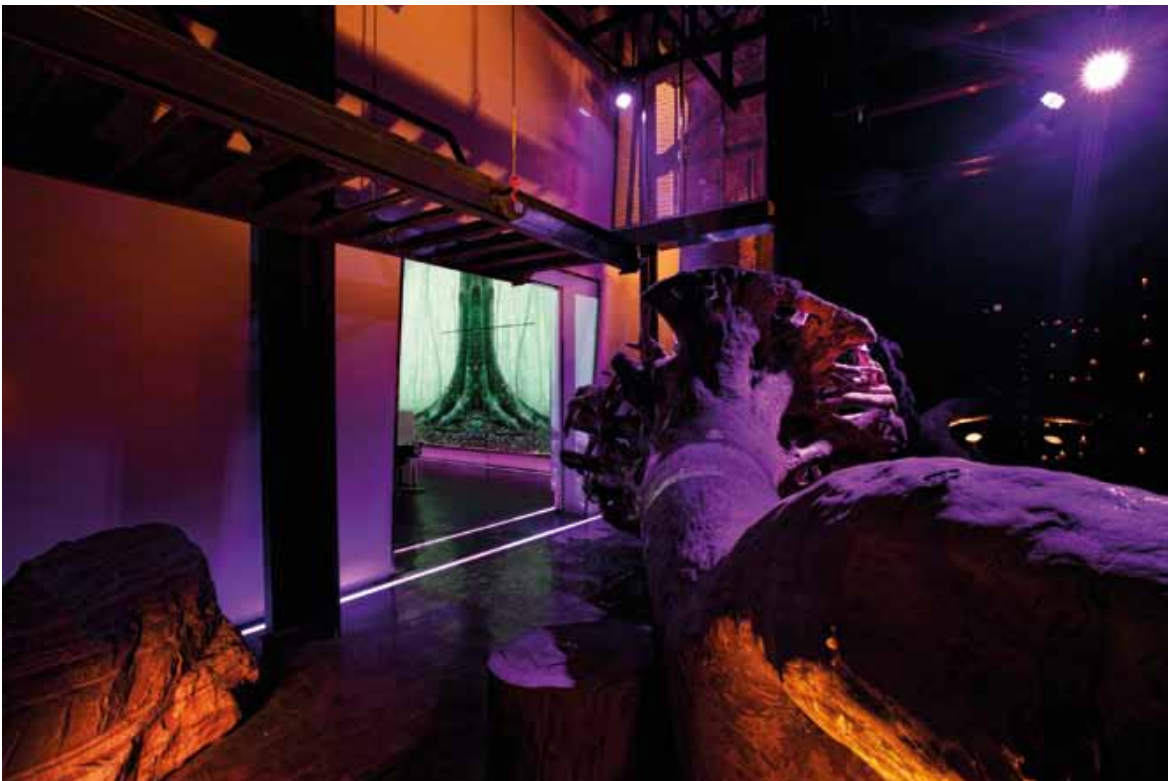
The dining room is a windowless space with executive

chairs around a long table. The names of the diners are spotlighted in front of each chair. The guests are completely unaware of the 25 staff behind the scenes managing the audio-visual components or creating the dishes.

A good example of the impact of the performance is the sequence around the serving of the egg Gruyère ravioli and the black truffle soup bread. There are images on the walls of a truffle forest in France, with the music of the Carnivale piano sonata by the Canadian Chilly Gonzales. Suddenly, the sides of the room appear to plunge into the earth while the images change rapidly to enlarged cross sections of black truffles. The whole impact is so strong that for a long time afterwards, I was convinced we were in a large lift that actually went down several floors.

Shortly after this, the diners temporarily retire to a small bar while the tablecloth is replaced by a rectangular slice of AstroTurf with flowers strewn on it and gingham place settings. The wall imagery is now an idyllic pre-war scene of French picnickers sprawled on a riverbank next to a vintage car, enjoying themselves with a grand picnic. The first dish served with this is a large black cod cooked in aspic with sea urchin jelly. The individual slices are placed in picnic-like Tupperware containers, while a scratchy radio plays old pop song from the 80s. This is followed by Chicken in a Jar (page 94), served underneath a slice of foie gras, which has been smoked in a large Kilner jar. The only sound playing at this point is that of the sizzling sound of >

BELOW 25 staff manage the audio-visual components behind-the-scenes.







PAUL PAIRET

“The impact of what I do is ridiculously obvious once you have been here, but until people come and experience it, I will never be able to convince anyone it is not just a gimmick.”



« a roast chicken. It is difficult to convey the power of these audio-visual images as they completely envelop everyone in the room, without any escape.

It is also worth emphasising that the accompanying wines were all spectacular, ranging from ‘Y’ 2011, the dry white wine made by Château d’Yquem; Didier Dagueneau’s Silex 2009, the greatest Pouilly Fumé; Corton-Charlemagne 2008 by Jadot; Chapoutier’s Ermitage Le Meal Blanc 2010 and Château Palmer 1996.

The meal also ends on a humorous note. Guests assume they have finished the meal when Adele’s ‘Skyfall’ is played, with lyrics “This is the end...” accompanied by end credits on the wall, mentioning the chef, technicians and kitchen staff. They all retire to the nearby bar for a farewell drink. After they are halfway through, a rooster crows and they are ushered by for their ‘breakfast’ of fried egg and bacon, while black and white images of morning room service in a hotel are flashed on the walls.

The final act is for the doors to be flung open, showing the kitchen, where another small dish of toasted cubes with peanut butter and coffee are served while guests unwind from the previous two and a half hour experience and say their farewells to the chef and staff.

It is impossible to convey how convincing the whole experience is—as Paul Pairet says, somehow eating fish while surrounded by beach scenes and audible waves, somehow enhances the effect.

Even Alain Ducasse had to be strong-armed by his assistant to go the first time, as he was convinced it would be tedious and kitschy, but afterwards he quickly changed his tune.

There are only two menu choices for the moment—A and B, which each took a year to prepare and perfect. Pairet is working on a third one at present, but doesn’t expect to launch it until the end of 2015. It is virtually impossible to replicate the experience in another location because of the huge amount of time and money that has gone into the technical side of the operation. According to a *New York Times* account, there are more than eight miles of cabling, 36 speakers and seven high-resolution projectors involved in creating the special effects.

The price for the experience is naturally high—the equivalent of US\$500 per person for the food and a further \$250 for the wines. Despite it being booked solid for months in advance, it is certainly not a moneymaking operation. Pairet admits that it is “not really a commercial proposition,” but given that it is the fulfilment of a lifetime dream, he hardly cares.

“I determine the atmosphere precisely for each dish to make it more relevant. When you are in the room, you cannot escape what is being superimposed on the dish. The impact of what I do is ridiculously obvious once you have been here, but until people come and experience it, I will never be able to convince anyone it is not just a gimmick.” ■

ABOVE Paul has now called Shanghai home for 10 years.