

Dinner as theatre: behind the scenes at Ultraviolet, Shanghai ‘immersive’ restaurant

The ‘actors’ - Paul Pairet’s chefs and servers – present 20-course French menu to their ‘audience’: one table of guests amid a vast room who are fed sounds, smells, images and incident along with the dishes. Kitchen team get a voyeuristic thrill as they watch CCTV cameras convey the diners’ reactions

PUBLISHED : Friday, 05 February, 2016, 4:00am

UPDATED : Friday, 05 February, 2016, 12:51pm



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Juliana Loh

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The 10 guests have met in advance before being driven to Ultraviolet, which is in an undisclosed location. Head chef Greg Robinson gets a phone call, alerting him that the guests are en route – timing is key here – and the kitchen moves into action.

I am already at the grungy warehouse creative space with Pairet. The size of Ultraviolet is about the equivalent of a football field, and would seat about 100 if it were a “normal” restaurant. Pairet’s vision is different, though: his place only seats only 10.



All the guests have plenty of time to mingle around the 300-year-old camphor tree at the dining interval, and they also eat together, even if they are strangers – which this group are not. They include Pierre Gagnaire (with 13 Michelin stars for

his various restaurants, including the two-star Pierre at the Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong), Akrame Benallal (*one star for his eponymous restaurants in Paris and Hong Kong*); Glenn Viel (L’Oustau de Baumanière, two stars), Ronan Kervarrec (Château de la Chèvre d’Or, two stars) and Mitsuharu Sakamoto (Unisson des Coeurs, a one star French restaurant in Osaka). Ultraviolet doesn’t have any stars – but that’s because Michelin doesn’t have any guides to Chinese cities. It is, however, recognised by another guide: it’s number 24 on the annual World’s 50 Best Restaurants list.

It’s fascinating to observe the Ultraviolet chefs cooking with absolute precision while watching the guest’s reactions to the food and the multisensory experience in the dining room as seen through CCTV cameras. The servers pick up the dishes according to cues and tempo – exactly how a theatre production is run.

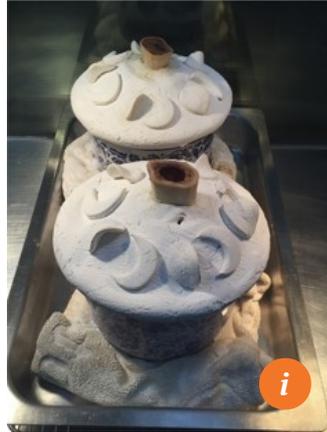
It goes like clockwork, with timing and temperatures planned right down to the decimal point. The kitchen is silent, apart from the occasional beeping equipment and a call-out for the next scene and next dishes.



Right by the kitchen is the studio with a team of two activating sounds, scents and audiovisual material on cue. There are a total of 16 CCTV cameras on site to

monitor the dining room. Like Brechtian theatre, where the “fourth wall” between the audience and actor is broken, the service staff role-play – at one point the porcelain vase of a slow-cooked veal shank is “accidentally” thrown onto the floor, breaking into shards. The server carries on, picking up

the veal shank wrapped in lotus leaves, and continues to serve the diners. It appears to be the favourite moment in the kitchen, with all the chefs watching the CCTV for guest reactions. It's hard not to wonder how this deliberate disruption affects the guests' impression of the juicy, tender meat.



The voyeurism is perverse, yet thrilling. The “actors” – chefs and service staff – are not just delivering a “performance” (the food), they are also watching the reactions and responses of the “audience” (the guests), who may not even know if they're being watched.

In addition to running the kitchen team, led by Robinson, Pairet takes on the role of director –

managing the production team who bring together the different elements, including sound, lights, set and design, to trigger memories, raise questions and take diners out of their comfort zone.



Pairet's explanation of his concept is complex.

“Ultraviolet encompasses what I believe the most in food: the capacity to serve each dish at its peak in controlling both the offer and the timing – as well as

the consequence of this powerful tool set of the capacity to ‘trigger’ the intangible atmosphere by tailoring it around the dish, to lead the diner's imagination, to amplify the focus, to influence the perception of the taste and the memory of the entire experience. It is all about a relevant celebration of food.”

The 20-course meal with wine pairings is accompanied by audio, visual and olfactory stimulants. Pairet works from a media library, which sounds like how an ad agency would run, with producers having endless materials to source. Pairet, however, works the other way around. “The food always leads,” he says. The scenarios and creative conceptualisation follow.”

Robinson works with three sous chefs and the team to perfect every menu. “The first menu we launched in 2012 took 10 full rehearsals. We currently have two menus: UV A and UV B, and the menus are updated every year, with UV C set to launch in May 2016.”

Developing a new menu takes up about 75 per cent of

Pairet's time and scenarios are sketched out by him as the menu [evolves].



The dish that stole the evening for the chefs dining that night was the “Fish Tupperware”, cod cooked in five spices and kappa powder – a gelatin derived from seaweed with a special melting and boiling point. They were all eyes as the servers cut through the gelatin mould to reveal the cooked fish.

Robinson explains: “The technique is very similar to sous vide – vacuumed air-tight, flavoured slowly by five spices and cooking the fish in liquid gel. The gel cools and when we unmould it, we reveal a perfectly cooked fish.”

The idea of Ultraviolet was conceived nearly 20 years ago and finally came to life in Shanghai in 2012; it was a huge project, given the logistics and cost challenges.

As always, a brilliant idea is often “adapted” by others. Paco Roncero’s Sublimotion in Ibiza, which opened in 2014, bears an uncanny resemblance to Ultraviolet, although the Spanish chef says they are his own creations.

Don’t be fooled – Ultraviolet is the original. And even if others are copying the idea, it’s impossible to recreate it without having the vision, imagination and culinary expertise of Pairet and his team.

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Lifestyle > Food & Drink

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Ultraviolet’s Paul Pairet (left) and head chef Greg Robinson at work in Ultraviolet, Shanghai.

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A live feed of the dining room is shown in the kitchen, tender meat.

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Veal shank at Ultraviolet.

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Ultraviolet chef Paul Pairet (centre, wearing cap) with his Michelin-starred guests.

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