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Food

Immersion of the senses



The dining room at Ultraviolet in Shanghai is reset Dec. 2 during a 20 minute intermission ready for the second part of its guests' meal. / Korea Times photo by Yun Suh-young

By Yun Suh-young

SHANGHAI – A shuttle bus pulls in to an empty parking lot between buildings in a remote neighborhood. The location is a mystery whose address is not revealed to guests. As a group, they are escorted to this venue from a different meeting point.

When arriving at the parking lot, the building on the right with a transparent entrance seems like the way in. But that's not the entrance.

Walking toward the end of the parking lot, there's a shabby looking container building that sits to the left. When the manager rings the bell, a heavy steel door slowly opens sideways, inviting guests into a dimly lit, confined space that resembles a freight lift.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump....

The loud thumping sound continues for several minutes, making the guests wonder if it's music or noise. Actually, it's supposed to be a heartbeat, meant to escalate excitement and tension before going into the secretive venue.

A door opens again, unexpectedly. Inside the new space, 10 black wine glasses are neatly placed on the bar. There's nothing in them really, but curious customers hold them up to drink.

The James Bond theme song plays, escalating tension further. You feel like an agent entering a secret organization to fulfill a mission.

After a few minutes, another door opens. Guests enter a dark room with purple ultraviolet rays lighting a table and chairs. On the table, each guest's name is projected in the purplish light (the color of ultraviolet rays – hence the name of the restaurant).

When guests are settled into their designated seats, the room darkens to a complete blackness.

Silence.

Then, just like in a movie theater, images are projected on the 360-degree wall surrounding the table. Music that matches the images plays in the background.

Then comes the food, some accompanied by entertainment or matching fragrance.

Among the 22 dishes on the menu, six are accompanied with a scent that matches the image projected on the screen. Every dish gets a scene of its own with matching music to go along with it. The music changes drastically from classical to rock depending on the food.

When this reporter went to Ultraviolet on a Saturday night, the dinner was set for course A, one of the three menus available at the restaurant. Everyone booking on the same date gets the same menu.

When it started, the first dish was Apple Wasabi "Ostie" to stimulate the palate, accompanied by a gothic church image in the background with "Hell's Bells" playing as music.

Then came a cigarette-shaped dish in red, "Foie Gras Can't Quit," which has foie gras that is so good you just can't quit eating. With "Micro Fish No Chips," a fish-and-chips-inspired dish that is only a tiny bite on a huge plate, rain filled the screen and the table projected the English flag while "Obladi-Oblada" played in the background. After several dishes came "Truffle Burnt Soup Bread" and the room became a forest. The smell of wood permeated the room.



The "Foie Gras Can't Quit" dish/
Courtesy of Ultraviolet

All of this was absorbed from the "backstage" inside the kitchen where a monitor showed how things were proceeding in the room. The reporter was given a "backstage pass" that was a rare opportunity offered to only a few international reporters. Before entering the backstage, she got a preview of the "show" inside the room before the guests arrived.

Toward the end of the course came "Hibernatus Gummies," one of the desserts, and the room became a game room with gummy bears racing each other on the screen, with Super Mario music in the background. Then the entire staff in the kitchen put on their hats and started running in circles around the guests. The head chef was no exception. The reporter was no exception. She had to put on a hat and run with the staff in her ankle boots.



The "Pop Rock Oyster" dish/
Courtesy of Ultraviolet

But you get the idea of how the experience is curated. It's not just about eating the dish – it's about the mood, the surroundings that come with it that enhance the experience and the taste. Music, images, scents and even entertainment provide a well-rounded dining experience where guests can use all five senses to really enjoy the dish.

"If you look at the menu, there is a lot of relationship between the courses," said French chef Paul Pairet who runs the restaurant, during an interview with The Korea Times following the dinner. "Even when you drink, the transition is not on the drink. A lot of the dishes are positioned one after another because they complement another and they can be a misbalance by itself.

"The little fish and chips can be a misbalance in itself but then it's rebalanced by the next course that comes. That's a very interesting way to work on 22 courses. I could have cut at 15. But it's the variation of the caliber of the dish, the size of the dish. I don't care about the balance in one plate because of the plates that will come after."

The dinner began at 7:30 p.m. and lasted until 11 p.m.

"We just try to put the right light on the dish. When people say we're an immersive project, we are immersing the people into the friggling plate! You can't escape what we do when we have a forest here and dish with a mushroom truffle on top and the scent that goes with it of the forest. You know, in a way, you're in a forest somewhere. We're saying forget about the explanation, hey it's all here!"

The restaurant received three Michelin stars this year in the 2018 edition of the guidebook for Shanghai, an upgrade from its previous two stars.

"I deserved it. The truth is I was happy Michelin did not wait. For Michelin, it's a strong sign of modernity because, if you look at it, they always hesitate on modern tables. Always, regardless of the level. The level of modern table is always higher than the classic table because there is less point of reference."

Ultraviolet is also one of the most expensive restaurants in the world, with dinner prices beginning at 4,000 yuan (\$604) and going up to 8,888 yuan (\$1,342). At first the price sounds ridiculous and unreal, but when seeing how much work and technology are put into creating this dining experience, it makes sense.

"It took too long," Pairet said. "It was crazy. We had some very patient people behind us. It was supposed to take one year, but it took more than two. A lot of people underestimated the complexity of the restaurant. There's nothing we haven't redone three times. The seating was done three times. That's a lot of money."



Chef Paul Pairet cooks one of the dishes to be served while guests watch him in real time on a screen. / Korea Times photo by Yun Suh-young

But it was possible because of the support he received from his investor, VOL Group, which also owns Pairet's other restaurant, "Mr. and Mrs. Bund."

When asked why he settled in Shanghai, the French chef said, "The opportunity is easier, the money is easier. Open-mindedness is easier. Things like this have been facilitating the growth of somebody like me, whereas in France, I would have had too many obstacles. In France, everybody has an opinion and some of them are so old-school, full of prejudice. So it's double-sided. At the end of the day, I'm happy I came to Shanghai."

Pairet had this project in mind 20 years ago but it only materialized in 2012 when he opened Ultraviolet.

"I had the idea probably before 1996," he said. "I wanted to do it in Australia. I wanted to find a little place where I can put the table, 12 seats, so I would come at the end of the dinner like Jesus Christ and I would have called it The Last Supper. I wanted to control the table as people sit down at 7 p.m. That's the same principle as Ultraviolet."

When people see or hear about his restaurant, a lot of them tell him that's what they wanted to do. But Pairet disagrees.

"Truth is, that's not what you wanted to do," he said. "That's what you thought you wanted to do but never formalized completely as a full project. That's very different. The idea is only valid when the execution of the idea is valid. If you have a great idea, but if you don't execute it, there's not such a thing as a good idea."