

Dans le Noir: the darkest dining

Dans le Noir is a restaurant in Clerkenwell where you eat in complete and utter darkness. *MS* culture editor Kate joined her neuroscientist father and celebrity chef uncle Rick Stein to sample London's most bizarre dining experience



Kate Stein
Culture Editor

THE idea is simple. You eat in a pitch-black room, having been guided to your table and served by a blind waiter. By depriving you of sight, it is hoped that your other senses will be awakened, allowing your appreciation of food to enter a whole new dimension. The darkness will liberate your taste buds, allowing them to unravel tastes, aromas, flavours and textures in a 'unique sensory experience'. Well, that is what's supposed to happen but not everyone agrees, particularly when it comes to the quality of the food. One critic from *The Times* went as far to say, "At Dans le Noir, you do not wish for your other senses to be heightened; you would quite like to be deprived of them. Especially your sense of taste." Although the food might be controversial, there is one thing everyone agrees: Dans le Noir is one weird and wacky experience.

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entist who specialises in the physiology of vision, and my uncle, celebrity fish chef Rick Stein, to join me. Now, I realise that this may seem like brazen flaunting of my family connections but tell me, who could be better dining companions for Dans le Noir than the brain master and the food maestro? Each Stein brother could provide valuable insight for this review, both are true blue foodies and they are also great fun to get pissed with. Perfect.

The Stein trio visited Dans le Noir on a cold, blustery

evening in February. The restaurant, despite all the hype, is a small unassuming little place tucked away in one of the back streets of Clerkenwell. Upon entering a normally lit lounge, we were greeted by Chloe, our elegant French hostess, who offered us a range of menus. We all opted for the three-course 'Surprise' menu, where you only find out what you've been eating at the end of the meal. Uh oh.

After depositing our belongings (including any potential sources of illumination such as cigarette lighters, mobile phones or even watches) in a locker, we were introduced to Rodrique, our blind waiter, who led us into the restaurant in single file. With a hand on the shoulder of the person in front, we were led through thick, velvet black-out curtains into the darkest room I have ever been in. Being the scaredy cat that I am, I felt rather disorientated and claustrophobic at first. But this was soon to pass when my attention shifted towards the important task at hand: how the hell was I going to manoeuvre my feeding and drinking without spilling it over everyone? I needed a bib.

At the table, Rodrique placed each person behind a chair and then, one by one, we were told to sit down. In front of each person sat a plate, cutlery and two plastic glasses, one for water and the other for wine. Rodrique filled our first glass but then left us to our own devices, handing me the bottle with the advice to gauge the level by placing a finger in the glass as I poured. I never imagined pouring a glass of wine in the dark would require such dexterity but amazingly, there were no spillages. In fact, we

adapted to our new environment like ducks to water and curiously, I noticed that the wine empties itself rather more quickly than it does when you can see it.

Fumbling with knives and forks and fingers, we scooped the mysterious food into our mouths. It doesn't matter if you eat like a pig, leaving half of it on your face. Nobody can see! It's rather liberating really, a feeling akin to being mirrorless at Glastonbury for days on end. It's a curious sensation when your attention shifts entirely from vanity to practicality. It was quite surprising how quickly we got used to doing without vision. Towards the end I was pouring out wine and pushing food round my plate almost without remembering that I couldn't actually see it.

In terms of the food, the starter was easy; smoked salmon (not bad), salmon moose (unnervingly soggy) and a couple of puff pastry things which were, well, puffy. For the main course I was convinced I was eating beef whilst Dad and Rick thought it was lamb. We later discovered it was venison. The fish was tricky too. We all decided on cod but it turned out to be hake. Our taste buds may not have been awakened, but they sure as hell were confused.

Clearly, the way in which food is presented really affects what we can taste. Whilst we were sitting in the dark, Rick told us about one of his TV blunders in which he mistook a battery-farmed turkey for an organic one because of its appearance. Apparently, the crew had rounded up a bunch of hotel workers to perform a blind taste test with Rick. Everyone was given two slabs of turkey: one organic, the other battery-farmed, and they had to guess which was which. The problem was, Rick had sneaked a look at each of the turkeys beforehand - and on noting the larger one, convinced himself it was battery-farmed (organic, free range turkeys tend to be leaner since they've got room to run around). Once he had got this into his head, even the dry, tough taste of the battery bird could not dissuade him. To add to a brilliant TV moment and my dear uncle's shame, all twenty hotel workers answered



Rick, Kate and John Stein briefly see the light in Dans le Noir

correctly. It seems that looks still count for a lot, even for the experts.

Now for the science: can blocking one sense really enhance another? My Dad, a Prof in neuroscience, doesn't think that that can happen so quickly; but he does believe that in the dark, we probably concentrate on taste more. Any real change in our senses is not going to happen over dinner. Blind people probably do develop better senses of taste and smell to compensate for their loss of vision, but that takes years, not hours. Certainly their hearing improves; that's why so many piano tuners are blind. What's

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more, enhanced sensations may only be bestowed on those who are born blind.

We were interested to find out how our waiter, Rodrique, lost his sight. He told us that he was blinded in a terrible acci-

dent when he was two years old. Tragically, he cannot remember ever being able to see and all he can perceive is flashing light. With this logic in mind, perhaps the notion that blind people are wonderful in bed isn't such a myth after all. Come to think of it, Rodrique wasn't bad-looking. Girls, if you're ever in Clerkenwell, maybe you should look him up...

Dans le Noir is quite an experience. It does give you a rare insight into the world of the blind and I guess it really does provide a unique interaction between the diner and the waiter. However, I do lose my patience when the restaurant

before I opened my mouth (unusual for me) and in turn, others don't interrupt so much. I guess this is because there are no facial clues to tell you when people's conversation is coming to an end. Perhaps I should visit Dans le Noir with my girlfriends. Everyone I know who enters our hareem is overwhelmed by the way in which we constantly interrupt one another, as if fighting for airtime. Even though us girls understand that this is just how we communicate with each other, it would be interesting to see how we'd cope in the darkness.

The food wasn't spectacular, but it wasn't total crap either. My favourite bit was the pudding, which was some sort of chocolate cake. That was really tasty but then again I guess it's tricky to go wrong with chocolate, crumbly stuff - well, for my palate anyway. However, none of this really matters because the beauty of Dans le Noir is the experience, not the food. I'd recommend it to anyone with a sense of adventure. There is an Irish saying that 'A blind man can see his mouth'. But in the words of my dear dad, "Without vision, neither neuroscientist nor chef can really taste properly".

Dans Le Noir can be found at 30-31 Clerkenwell Green, EC1; 020 7253 1100

Surprise menu: 3 course- £37

blurb starts banging on about 'empathy for the blind' and the 'transfer of trust' between everyone. But don't get me wrong, it's true that the darkness does weird things to you. For example, I noticed that I tended to think much more