

Dining in the dark

Dans Le Noir has all the attributes you'd expect from a good restaurant: great service and delicious mains finished off with a tasty dessert. Except you'll be eating in pitch darkness. Liane Katz reports



o [Liane Katz theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), Wednesday 1 March 2006 13.20 GMT



Hold on ... diners are led into the blacked out dining room at Dans Le Noir. Photograph: Dans Le Noir

As the early spring sunshine warmed my cheeks, it felt even more unnatural to want to closet myself away in the culinary equivalent of a photographic dark room to indulge in London's latest gastro experience. But this lunchtime I had the privilege of being the first customer at Dans Le Noir, a new and challenging eaterie in Farringdon.

Diners eat (or attempt to) in absolute darkness - mobile phones and even digital watches must be left outside - and are physically guided around and served by visually impaired staff. The idea is to raise awareness about blindness and turn the tables on society's attitudes to disability. Fully sighted visitors must put all their faith in the staff, who are seen as disadvantaged in the outside world, but have the upper hand here by knowing their way around every inch of the restaurant.

I wondered if not seeing the food or its presentation would affect my appetite and my enjoyment of the meal. And would it really be possible to have a proper catch-up with a friend over lunch when I couldn't even see her face? As my dining companion is heavily pregnant, the waiters would be presented with the additional challenges of more frequent (escorted) visits to the Ladies, a ban on raw eggs, goats' cheese and the like, and the imperative not to bump us into anything en route around the dining room.

After placing our order and locking up our coats, bags and phones in the fully lit bar area, we were led, clutching each other's shoulders, down a dimly lit corridor. The occasional red ceiling lights were designed to prepare our eyes for the total blackout of the dining room. Now I'm not claustrophobic, but I admit to having felt slightly sick as we were led through the thick black curtains and encouraged to grope for our chairs. All the table-top apparel was

right in front of us - somewhere. But which was the wine glass and where on earth was the bread?

Much awkward giggling and self-conscious conversation followed and I wondered what on earth it would be like to hold a true blind date here. As we fumbled around attempting to pour out the water and tuck into the bread we gradually got our bearings, but we did constantly pick up each other's glasses. One colleague had suggested I bring a bib along and I was beginning to think he might have a point.

We had opted for the ultimate challenge of the surprise menu, so would have to guess what each dish was, lurking somewhere straight ahead. The starters were easy - lovely crunchy asparagus, which could be picked up and shovelled in with a bit of wiping of hands to remove the slimy hollandaise sauce. I briefly flirted with a fork, but kept getting it upside down, so I downed tools. There is a childlike fun to be had in jabbing your fingers all over the plate, feeling the different temperatures and textures.

The main course was trickier, though just as delicious: I guessed cod (it was bream) and identified a great big sloppy chunk as a slice of aubergine. Braving cutlery, much to my friend's disgust, I found a combined scooping action of fork from the left and knife from the right was best when attacking a pile of potatoes dauphinoise. I was beginning to relax and lose the apprehensive rollercoaster feeling, but it still felt strange to be talking about the usual gossip in such unfamiliar surroundings and in the heightened hearing of fellow diners.

Staff say that one phenomenon in their sister restaurant in Paris, which has been open for 18 months, is that diners lose their preconceptions and inhibitions and strike up conversation with neighbours further down the long bench tables. Luckily for them, the other diners in attendance today were not within range of our awkward wine-pouring or fish flicking, but I can see that having picked up and swilled from a neighbour's wine glass in error I would be more ready to introduce myself and apologise.

Dessert was a lovely apple tarte tatin accompanied by a mysteriously fragrant ice cream. Could it be mint or eucalyptus? I couldn't place it and would never have guessed lavender, but was happy enough using a pincer technique of spoon and fingers to get it to my mouth.

We had survived without too much spillage and it was time to go - but how would we get out? The answer was to call one of the waiters for a shoulder-led exit. Happily back in the daylight, I reflected on the overall experience. Was this just another gimmick?

Undoubtedly Dans Le Noir (French for "In the dark") provides a novelty dining experience but I was glad I had submitted to the challenge. I had a far greater appreciation of lives led permanently in the dark, but had also had a delicious meal.

The concept of dinner in the dark dates back to the 18th century, according to founder of the chain Edouard de Broglie, when charitable foundations organised them in France and Switzerland to promote awareness about blindness. In the last 18 months, some 60,000 diners have passed through his Paris restaurant's heavy curtains, ranging from students to the French prime minister. Many blind people have also visited with their families, he says, to share their experience of life in darkness.

But De Broglie stresses that though his restaurants will donate 10% of their annual profits to charity, his aim is to prove that conventional businesses can actually make money by employing disabled staff rather than providing charity. "This is not a charity and we're proud of that," he told me. "Blind people come don't come here for charity they come for proper work."

Further information

Dans Le Noir Restaurant, Bar & Lounge is at 30-31 Clerkenwell Green, London.

020 7253 1100 danslenoir.com