



Dine in the dark in Melbourne

Nothing good happens in the dark. Not with a roomful of strangers wielding knives. Every consumer of horror films knows that. It's with some trepidation then that diners are surrendering their phones, smart watches and other personal belongings to participate in Melbourne's latest culinary experiment – Dining in the Dark.

The Paris-born concept, Dans le Noir ("In the Dark"), doesn't involve mood lighting, candlelit tables or blindfold tastings. It's as the name implies – dining in the dark. Complete. Pitch. Black. Guests

are led into the restaurant by blind and vision impaired guides and served a mystery three- or five-course meal at a share table with the option of paired wine.

It sounds messy, confronting and awkward. And it can be at first. But it's a deeply visceral experience. One that removes your social inhibitions and hyper-stimulates your senses. You eat with your eyes first, so when vision is removed, you have to rely on other sensory cues: touch, taste, smell and sound.

"It's more than a restaurant, it's a total,

THE POINTY END

CONGA LINE INTO
THE DARKNESS



complete experience with different levels," says Dans le Noir? Melbourne manager Aurore Lepy. "It's the sensory experience, the social element and the human experience as well. You don't have your cell phone, you don't have anything that can distract your attention, so you are really focused on what the other people are saying, and conversations are more intense and more authentic and spontaneous."

Standing in a conga line with my hand on a stranger's shoulder, we are shepherded behind a foreboding black curtain. There is not a flicker of light and we shuffle, blind and tentatively, until our guide calls a halt and helps each of us each into a seat. The conversation is stilted at first but our first challenge, pouring a glass of water from a jug, is a great ice-breaker.

To my right is a British-born couple from Perth celebrating their 24th anniversary, to

"It's a sensory experience, the social element and the human experience"

my left, new parents enjoying their first night out since their son was born eight weeks earlier. The conversation flows, snippets of life stories are shared and there's much laughter, punctuated by the arrival of food and a soft hand guiding me towards my wine glass.

Eating is a journey; an exercise in exploration. I go in with fingers at first, then a fork and, with growing confidence, a knife, too. Often the fork reaches its target empty or is too full to fit in my mouth. It's a guessing game – rolling morsels around with my tongue to pick the textures and flavours. A juicy pillow of meat, maybe duck? The crunch of a vegetable chip, parsnip perhaps? And the unmistakable sweet fuzz of fairy floss. Fingers are licked, plates sometimes too. No one is watching.

Nearby a waiter starts singing happy birthday and the room erupts in singing. There are no candles to blow out. On another table (there are five, accommodating 12 guests) a man gets down on bended knee and proposes to his girlfriend. The dark is not for everyone. Occasionally guests ask to get out. It usually happens within five minutes of entering the restaurant, but most will go back in once they have had a few moments to process the experience.





THE COMO'S UNIQUE DINING EXPERIENCE



"It can take a couple of minutes to adjust, but when people are starting to have their food and their drinks they are feeling more comfortable," Lepy says. There are infrared CCTV cameras rolling at all times, just in case.

Dans le Noir was launched in Paris 14 years ago by French entrepreneur Edouard de Broglie of Ethik Investment Group. Since then it has expanded internationally, with more than one million people experiencing the concept at restaurants in Paris, London, Barcelona, Madrid, St Petersburg, Auckland, Nice and Nantes. Melbourne was the "obvious" choice for Australia's first Dining in the Dark experience, Lepy says, hinting that more may be coming.

After more than two hours in total darkness, we emerge, blinking and squinting, back into the light. Apart from sleeping it's the longest I've been in the dark – that dark – since the womb. Disembodied voices are given faces, hugs are exchanged, the menu is revealed and, remarkably, I leave with not a skerrick of spillage on my clothes.

Dans le Noir? Melbourne opens for dinner Thursday to Sunday at The Como Melbourne; melbourne.dansle noir.com

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