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Dining in the dark: 2 Berlin restaurants offer a supersensory experience



Outside the Unsicht Bar in Berlin, you can see. Once inside the dining room, there's not a drop of light. (Franziska Krug / Getty Images)

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You might think that the whole point behind a "dining in the dark" restaurant is to get a better idea of what it's like to be blind. In some ways, that's true. But, according to Sandy, our visually impaired waitress at Berlin's Unsicht Bar, it's much more about learning to appreciate your other senses.

What is dining in the dark? Imagine a normal restaurant, except the lights are off, and I mean really off. There's not a single photon anywhere.

My photographer, who didn't have a lot to shoot, and I chose Berlin to test out this kind of dining for a couple of reasons: First because Berlin is one of our favorite cities and, second, because the concept kind of started here. Well, officially it started in Zurich in 1999, but the Unsicht Bar and Nocti Vagus are two of the oldest dark-dining restaurants in the world, each being about 15 years old.

Dining at the Unsicht Bar (in German, *unsichtbar* means unseen) begins in the light, upstairs in the bar. There you are given some helpful pointers, such as don't leave your table and always reach for your water, beer or wine glass from the bottom. What they don't tell you is, a white shirt is a bad wardrobe choice, unless you want to exit looking like a modern art painting.

During the briefing, you're also asked to select your meal (it's impossible to read the menu once you enter the restaurant). The Unsicht Bar likes to have guests guess about the food they are being served. You pick only what meat you like (fish, chicken, etc.), or you can choose the "surprise" dish, about which you know nothing.

Nocti Vagus (in Latin, *noctivagus* means wandering at night) also offers a surprise menu choice, but the rest of the menu is clearly spelled out. Another difference between the restaurants is that Nocti Vagus offers a live after-dinner performance, in this case a play. This interesting twist turned out to be a bit cryptic for me, not only because of the lack of visual stimuli but also because the play was in German. I later learned they also have English-language nights.

In choosing menus, I highly recommend going for the surprise. Obviously taste and smell are heightened in this environment, and not only is it fascinating and exciting to find out what you ordered using only your nonsight senses, but even once you have more or less identified what you are eating, it's still a whole new experience eating familiar foods in the dark. The tastes and smells are so much more intense, and you notice subtleties in the foods that you miss when distracted by vision.

At either restaurant, when you first enter the darkened space, it's both unnerving and electrifying. Guided by your waiter, you enter a mysterious black world of dinner conversations, clinking glasses and scraping silverware.

As one can imagine, your relationship with your waiter is much different in this setting than in regular restaurants. The waiter not only brings you food, but he or she is your only guide in this world devoid of light.

As such, I became very attached to our waiters, especially on our first night, at the Unsicht Bar. It was more than a bit disturbing when Sandy left us alone for the first time, especially because I didn't know she was gone until she didn't answer back. I found myself calling out her name in the dark, feeling a bit like a lost penguin chick on a crowded Antarctic beach.

After some time, however, I started to relax and explore my immediate surroundings. I found the breadbasket and my beer. I tried to imagine what the people looked like who were attached to the voices at the next table, how the space was arranged. Next to us was a wall; not only could I feel that, but I could "hear" that. The rest of the restaurant was hard to decipher.

Conversations with your dinner partner also are much more intense and engaging in the dark. The familiar sound of his or her voice is like a safe harbor in a sea of noise. A tip: Don't invite a reticent friend; you'll be in for a long night.

Throughout the evening, I also heard a strange snapping and clicking sound that moved around the space. When I asked Sandy, she explained that this was one of the ways the waiters let each other know when they are coming through with hot plates or cold drinks.

Eating was a challenge in itself, especially connecting the fork with the food. I kept pushing my food around the plate without getting ahold of it (thankfully they didn't serve peas). This brings me to another tip: Wash

your hands before you sit. I can guarantee that, at some point in the night, you're going to get hungry enough to use your fingers, but don't worry, nobody can see you.

Dining at Nocti Vagus, where our waiter was blind, was much the same experience. Aside from creating a remarkable culinary experience, the concept of dining in the dark came from a desire to provide employment for the visually impaired. And it has been a huge success. Over the years, these kinds of restaurants have sprouted up in major cities across the globe.

On that note, if you ever have a chance to dine in the dark, go for it. It's a win all the way around and a chance to experience something different.

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If you go

Unsicht Bar, www.unsicht-bar-berlin.de/en/html/home_1.html

At the Unsicht Bar, you can choose your meat, but everything else is a surprise (how they prepare it, the sides, what is for dessert, etc.), or you can make the whole meal a surprise. I chose the three-course meal, but you also can have four courses for a slightly higher price. I chose beef. The food was not remarkable. The salad was a Mediterranean affair with mixed greens, nuts, olives and a vinaigrette dressing. The main course was beef Wellington, and the sides were potatoes and asparagus (not sure what it was called as I did not order it; it was a surprise). They were supposed to debrief us and tell us what we had eaten, but we got involved more in talking to our waiter about her life and work.

Meal prices ranged from 41.50 to 62.50 euros (about \$45 to \$67).

Nocti Vagus, www.noctivagus.com/english

At Nocti Vargas, you are given a menu, but you also can get the surprise, in which case you aren't told what kind of meat you will get. I chose the surprise and strangely got almost exactly the same meal as in the Unsicht Bar: salad, beef Wellington with potatoes, and some vegetable sides.

Prices ranged from 39 to 59 euros (about \$42 to \$64).

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