



WITH SIGHTS,
SOUNDS, SCENTS
AND A SECRET
LOCATION,
CHEF PAUL PAIRET'S
IMMERSIVE DINING
EXPERIENCE
COULD BE THE NEXT
GREAT LEAP IN
CULINARY EVOLUTION.

SHANGHAI SURPRISE

BY HOWIE KAHN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BAKAS ALGIRDAS

PAUL PAIRET, the French-born 49-year-old chef, visited 80 spaces throughout Shanghai before deciding to set Ultraviolet — the restaurant he calls “the project of my life” — in an old recording studio, tucked behind a parking structure, and adjacent to a canal whose shore is dotted with men selling melons from wheelbarrows and flatbed trucks. Building his 10-seat, high-tech, multimedia nightly dinner opera took nearly two years. When Pairet finally served his inaugural meal in May 2012, 8.5 miles of cables and wires had been connected, 12,000 square feet of concrete had been poured, and 36 speakers had been mounted to work in conjunction with 7 high-resolution projectors. A bespoke Molteni range was installed for precision cooking. Brightly colored Sieger tableware was ordered. Zwiesel crystal arrived by the crate.

Since this is billed as “immersive dining,” Pairet hesitates to provide any spoilers. “The more I talk,” he says, speaking English with a husky French accent, “the more I’m going to bias your experience. It should be completely yours. The perception of the meal should be completely based on you.” Pairet is six-foot-two, a stubby chain smoker, with sideburns thick as New York strips, and dark, serious eyes that convey a continuous stream of concentration. Wearing jeans, a black collarless shirt with a dragon embroidered on the back, and his signature Chinese-style

FIELD OF DREAMS
Diners at Ultraviolet during a “picnic,” with an AstroTurf-covered table and projections of an early-spring meadow on the walls.



THE MENU READS GNONOMICALLY AND ABSTRACTLY, BUT ALSO EVOCATIVELY, LIKE A PASSAGE FROM GERTRUDE STEIN'S 'TENDER BUTTONS.'



A FRESH PERSPECTIVE Clockwise from above: the chef Paul Pairet on the rooftop next to his restaurant; documentary-style videos from Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market set the scene for Sashimi Steak Frites, a play on fish and chips; Pairet's staff works to create the next course; guests approach the entrance; a dessert, Mont Blanc Snow-Bowl, incorporates flavors like orange blossom and Japanese drinkable yogurt; Tomato Mozza ... and Again, one of Pairet's highly conceptual creations.

military cap, he's alluding to a concept he calls "psycho taste," which posits that eating can act as a gateway to the mind. It delves into the notion that memories, associations, expectations, ideas, misunderstandings, joys and fears all play a role in the experience of a meal. Every person who sits down at the table is essentially consenting to have his psyche probed by a chef who has spent years thinking about how food can prompt emotional triggers.

DINNER NO. 243 (each meal is ritualistically numbered) starts like all dinners: with a 6:30 p.m. gathering of 10 strangers at a meeting point in back of Mr. & Mrs. Bund, Pairet's highly acclaimed albeit more traditional Shanghai restaurant. A greeter passes flutes of palate-cleansing pear cider from Normandy. Ten tickets, each folded 17 times into a tiny leaflet and bearing a pink "UV" logo, are affixed to a tablecloth. An expat German banker grabs at his eagerly; a famous actress from Hong Kong unclips hers gently. Once unfolded, the menu is revealed. It reads gnomically and abstractly, but also evocatively, like a passage from Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons" — "Foie Gras - Can't Quit Red Fruit Cabbage Ash West & Smoke Ennio Morricone" — citing flavors, textures, sights and sounds, aiming to prime both the appetite and the senses.

Before boarding a bus for a winding trip through Shanghai's narrow side streets toward an undisclosed location, Ultraviolet's host Fabien Verdier, 35, wearing a perfectly tailored tuxedo jacket, offers advice in the vein of a spiritual retreat. "Tonight, be available," he says. Once on board, he continues: "We will make you wait outside a door. If a door opens in front of you, just walk through it." Upon arrival, the group descends into the

darkness and finds its way into an antechamber with violet lights and amplified, throbbing heartbeat sounds. A mesh door peels back automatically and the group advances into another room, silent until the theme music from "2001: A Space Odyssey" begins to play. Finally, the doors to the dining room are opened, revealing a boardroom-style table with leather chairs that lower, rise and recline hydraulically. Each guest's name is projected onto the table, which will act as a kind of canvas for the rest of the night. Projections kick in, filling all 360 degrees of the space with an initial sequence that simulates being lowered into the ground — faster and faster, toward the core of the earth, until, surprisingly, the journey terminates in outer space. Some of the guests believe Pairet equipped his dining room with an actual elevator, and that they are, in fact, underground. Others recognize it was just an illusion. Regardless, belief is suspended and 10 strangers in reclining leather chairs wait while floating among a cluster of stars.

Every course plays out like a vignette in which the food is paired with images and sounds. Cuttlefish whipped to the consistency of marshmallow and molded into a swirl brings on hypnotic chords and a series of slowly whirling concentric circles on the walls. Lobster set in a seawater consommé and topped with ponzu foam cues the sound of the ocean and all the walls fill up with crashing waves. Every course, every scenario, draws you in deeper. Yet Pairet insists that what's eaten is the core of the experience and that all the other sensory pleasures here are derived from, and nourished by, the food.

"The lobster," Pairet will later tell me, "the way it's cooked dictates everything else. Do you think a lobster that is grilled should be

illustrated the same way as a lobster that is poached? Of course not. The grilled lobster might require a very tropical beach and the sea at sunset. Think of Bali. Think of those sounds. The other one, there's no beach. They poach lobster in places that are more wild. It's fishermen cooking on a boat with seawater. The ocean there is rough."

PAIRET HAS TAKEN an unconventional road to global culinary superstardom, never staying in one country or in one kitchen for too long. Born in Perpignan, France, near the Catalan region of Spain — an area that's come to be known for its imaginative and highly sophisticated cuisine — Pairet, who identifies with those traits, spent years working in top kitchens from Hong Kong to Jakarta to Istanbul, before arriving in Shanghai in 2005. It was here he opened Jade on 36 and quickly turned it into one of Asia's premier restaurants. "I never moved because I wanted to move," Pairet says. "I moved because the restaurant business, and especially the kind of food I'm doing, is tricky."

For all his itinerancy, Pairet held onto the idea for Ultraviolet for 15 years. A version nearly happened in Paris; Sydney seemed like a possibility for a while. There was even talk Pairet would carry out his vision at the Setai in Miami Beach. Had Pairet executed his idea 15 years ago, he might have been mistaken for a pretentious showman. But now, when the global dining scene has normalized concepts like molecular gastronomy and foraging, elevating chefs to a level of fame few could have predicted, Ultraviolet, and its auteur, seem like the next steps in the chain of culinary evolution. "It could have happened anywhere," Pairet says. Shanghai, however, with its bent toward excessive luxury and focus on being the

city of the future, even in the present, is actually Ultraviolet's ideal spiritual home. "In the end," Pairet says, "a company invested in the project in China. So, I'm staying in China."

TWO NIGHTS LATER, during dinner No. 245 (every meal, which costs \$400 per guest, has sold out), Pairet introduces the first new menu since opening in 2012. Logically, and for all its moving parts, Ultraviolet shouldn't work. There's the James Cameron-esque insistence on innovation and intense production; the room that reads like an art installation by Olafur Eliasson; cuisine that puts Pairet in the company of the best chefs on earth. Everything combined, it should flop; come off as clutter or kitsch. But instead, Pairet has developed two distinctive menus — the original he calls UVA, the new one UVB — and two complete experiences that both succeed brilliantly, mesmerizingly and, as intended, deliciously. Both UV menus reflect Pairet's personality directly, setting the table with humor and grace, mischief and whimsy, with puzzles to solve and dishes to think through.

During the UVB dinner, enjoyment comes from innumerable sources: from the bread course with meunière, truffles, charred crusts and cigar smoke that instantly becomes a permanent memory to the bittersweet clip of Charlie Chaplin eating his boot in "The Gold Rush." And while UVA sets an almost

unreachable bar for dinner in every regard, UVB somehow manages to float above it, offering a tender experience that mere restaurants simply cannot achieve and demonstrating that Pairet can continue to make creative leaps even in such rarefied territory.

UVB concludes with a lengthy five-segment dessert sequence including a creation called Mont Blanc Snow-Bowl, which plays on flavors like orange blossom and Yakult, the Japanese sweetened drinkable yogurt. Before it's served, the room goes blue, the color of polar ice caves. It feels as if an arctic breeze is blowing through. The servers march out — one for every diner — and approach the table, each holding what looks like a 3-D map of a winter landscape beneath a glass dome. The domes are removed, the servers vanish, and the opening chords of Pink Floyd's "Shine On You Crazy Diamond" wash over the room.

Everybody goes silent, speechless. At the end of the meal, when the lights finally brighten, each diner will clamor for a few personal seconds with Pairet. Some will beam. Some will shake their heads: How did you do it? One man will openly weep in Pairet's arms, confessing how much the experienced moved him. But for now, and for what seems like an eternity, 10 blissed-out diners sink into a long, sweet meditation while, from a closed-circuit TV in the kitchen, Pairet watches, wondering how he can improve on even this moment. ■

