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Blindfolds, Caresses and Accordions

WRITTEN BY ADMIN ON NOVEMBER 16, 2011. POSTED IN EAT & DRINK.

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My dark dining adventure

By **Leonora Desar**

What have I gotten myself into this time? I wonder silently.

I am wearing a blindfold—pardon me, a fancy eye mask called a “Mindfold”—that makes me look like Cyclops from the movie X-Men. My hands rest lightly on the slender shoulders of a dancer/embodier—more on that later—who is guiding me to the restroom before the evening’s festivities begin. She tells me I may remove the mindfold once I am inside the restroom, but I must put it back on immediately afterward so I don’t to see my surroundings.

No, I am not a Skull and Bones novice preparing for my big initiation. It’s Thursday evening and I am at Camaje Bistro and Lounge in Greenwich Village, where I will soon, according to Camaje’s website, be whisked off to “a romantic, intriguing innerspace.” I, who have problems not spilling wine and sauce on myself under the best of circumstances, am about to eat a mysterious, French-inspired four-course meal in the dark, the contents of which won’t be revealed to me until the very end of the evening.

“We could have just blindfolded ourselves and eaten at home,” whispers my husband Lucien when I am led safely back outside the restaurant. While we wait with a feisty Russian family and another couple, he shows me a cartoon that he has scribbled of me in my X-Men mask. I scowl at him, unamused. “Just give it a chance!” I hiss.

Dana Salisbury, the creator and director of Dark Dining Projects, emerges from Camaje, her short hair gleaming a bright burgundy underneath the street lights. She gives us the drill.

“These events are not about blindness, they’re about celebrating all of the other senses. You know, like, we’re three-dimensional but we live in a very two-dimensional world... So tonight is part dinner party and part event. Dark dining is all about slowing down. Enjoying yourself. Toasting each other. Feeding each other...”

Feeding each other? How are we supposed to do that?

I am about to find out.

“OK, so does everybody have an item in their hand?”

I am now sitting inside Camaje. My hands successfully grasp what feels like a piece of bread, filling me with a sense of accomplishment that is soon dashed by the cold water that I’ve just spilled on my lap. As I said, I was never a very graceful eater.

“OK,” Salisbury resumes, her voice floating somewhere in the dark. “So what we’re going to do is



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on the count of three—don't do it, I'm just demonstrating verbally—one, two, three crunch! And what that's going to do is help create a sound snapshot. It should be able to give you a sense of the size of the room and where the other people are sitting in relationship to you. Are you ready?"

Crunch, crunch, crunch. Wow, I had never realized just how loud food could be.

It turns out that I never realized a lot of things. Like, for instance, how much I really enjoy white wine (if that is in fact what I'm drinking—I can't be absolutely certain with the mindfold on). The more I drink of it the more I realize how much I also really like salad, which (I believe) has now arrived as the first course.

"But you've never been crazy about salad before," Lucien reminds me. "You must be enjoying it because your other senses are heightened with the mindfold on."

I am not so sure about that, actually. Without any visual cues to alert me to what I'm eating, it's more like I am being tricked into getting past my own preconceived notions of what I think I like or dislike.

In any case, the next course has now arrived and I am pretty sure it's salmon, which I always tend to like a lot. Unfortunately, though, it's hard to eat without a knife and I, in my infinite clumsiness, would never dare to attempt it while still wearing my Cyclops mask.

So I do the unthinkable. I pick up a piece of it with my hand. I mean, no one's looking, right?

Not necessarily.

You see, the thing is that even though the patrons can't see one another, our hosts—who include Salisbury, Camaje's owner and chef Abigail Hitchcock, the dancer/embodiers (trained dancers who have "a good feel for how to be embodied and how to help other people feel embodied," according to Salisbury) and God knows who else—definitely can.

"I feel like we're in a fish bowl," Lucien whispers. "It's like we're on display and everyone can hear everything we're talking about."

"You're being paranoid—we would know if someone was nearby," I say.

"More water?" a voice suddenly asks us, just inches away.

"Now I feel paranoid," I whisper to Lucien when I think we are alone again.

"So, now that the wolf is no longer at the door, we're going to take about 10 minutes to just luxuriate in sound while the kitchen works on the main course," Salisbury says. "I give you Kamala."

I am wondering who the wolf is and why he's no longer here when an operatic, ethereal voice pierces the room accompanied by (what sounds like) an accordion. It's like being serenaded at a renaissance faire by a very vocal woodland nymph—if woodland nymphs played the accordion, which I am not sure they do.

"Ahhhhh," sings the nymph.

Suddenly, feminine hands begin to caress—yes, caress—my bare arms. This must be what I get for wearing a sleeveless dress.

Then the music stops. The hands do too.

"Did someone just feel us up?" Lucien asks.

The real fun, however, begins after the third course.

"Because we are so few we have a luxury tonight, which is that we can get people up dancing if they'd like," Salisbury says. "What we'll do is we'll come help you stand if you wish."

"We're not standing. We're staying...right?" Lucien pleads.

Wrong.

Salisbury's somehow familiar, feminine hands lead Lucien and I to the dance floor. Kamala, the

woodland nymph, is playing her accordion again with a vengeance. This time the mood is what I would expect to find if I stumbled into a tavern in Transylvania.

Hands clap. The accordion picks up the pace.

“I’m dancing with some pretty woman!” a female voice cries out in a thick Russian accent.

“See, this isn’t so bad,” I tease Lucien. Soon enough we are guided back to our seats.

“You’re so quiet,” Lucien says after a few minutes have passed.

It’s true. I’m all talked out. It’s one thing to sit for two hours with someone and fill in the silences with eye contact, but it’s quite another to have to rely entirely on words. Let’s just say I feel grateful that I’m not on a first date. I mean, talk about the potential for uncomfortable silences.

Even feeding each other—which Lucien and I do awkwardly under Salisbury’s tutelage — is not enough to add romantic flavor to an otherwise flavorful meal.

“Ouch! You almost poked my eyes out with your fork,” Lucien complains. “Thank God for the protection of that mindfold thing.”

Chop, chop.

“So now we’ve come to the dénouement of the evening,” Salisbury says. She introduces Hitchcock, who at last reveals the menu.

“I can’t believe that wasn’t salmon!” I exclaim.

“I can’t believe I just ate lavender ice cream,” Lucien says.

Finally we are led out by someone who sounds a lot like the dancer/emboïer from earlier in the evening. She warns us to remove our eye masks slowly and only when we arrive outside the restaurant.

“You mean we won’t get to see what the set-up looks like without the mindfold?” I ask.

“You’ll have to come back another day,” she says with a smile.

The question is, will we?

“The food was great,” I say to Lucien as we walk down the street.

“But it was \$120. Each!” he reminds me.

“Even the mindfolds were \$12 if we wanted to keep them.”

“I think it was worth it—for a one-time experience,” I rejoin. “I wasn’t exactly transported to ‘innerspace,’ but it did kind of feel like we were in Eastern Europe for a while.” Another thought suddenly occurs to me.

“Hey, you know what? When we get home, let’s see if we can buy a mindfold cheap on eBay.”

Camaje Bistro and Lounge, 85 MacDougal St. (betw. Bleecker & Houston Sts.), 212-673-8184; for a schedule of dark dining events, visit www.camaje.com/specialevents.html.

Diners nosh in blindness at Camaje Bistro and Lounge in Greenwich Village.
Photo courtesy of Dark Dining Projects

Tags: **camaje, camaje bistro and lounge, dana salisbury, dark dining projects, French, Greenwich Village, mindfold**

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