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<https://theluxuryeditor.com/review/dans-le-noir/>

DANS LE NOIR? REVIEW

England

Food & Drink

London

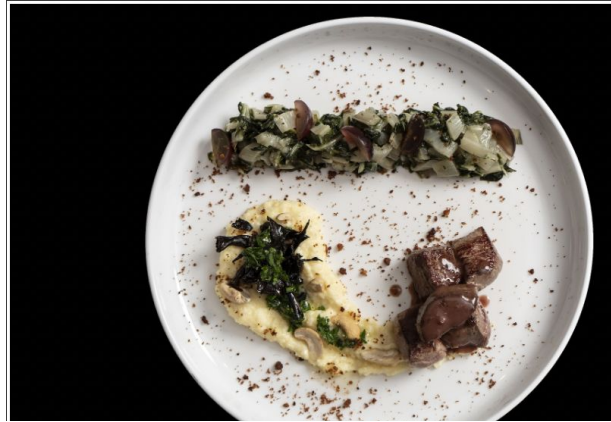
Restaurant Reviews

WRITTEN BY



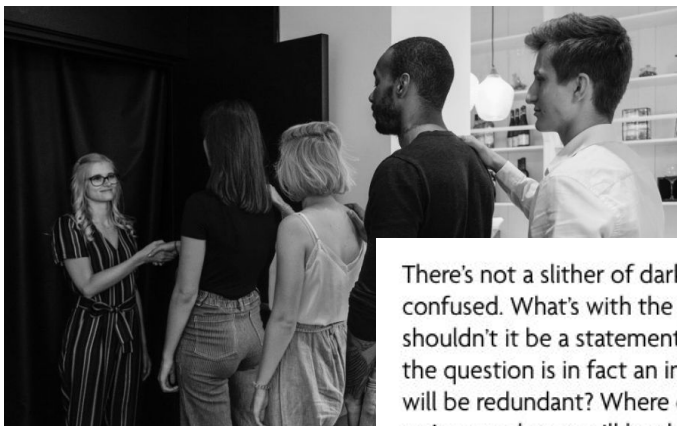
SIMON RUMLEY

Simon Rumley is one of the UK's leading independent film directors and his debut novel, *The Wobble Club* is published in October. Simon is also our man on the ground in London.



DANS LE NOIR?

From its outside, the burgundy facade on St John's Street in Clerkenwell is innocuous, maybe even underwhelming. Certainly, its architecture doesn't suggest the restaurant's bold conceit – haute cuisine in the pitch dark. The interior design doesn't suggest it either but we're greeted by a friendly receptionist who asks for our bags, coats, watches and more pertinently, our phones. She places everything in a locker and walks us next door to a bar cum waiting room. We have no idea what to expect next but order a White Russian and a Vodka and Tonic. Our drinks waiter asks if we want fish and meat or vegetarian for dinner? Although the menu changes on a three monthly basis, it is, otherwise, fixed. We opt for the former.



There's not a slither of darkness in sight except for the encroaching night outside so we discuss the restaurant's name. We're confused. What's with the question mark? Does this confirm our supposition it really won't be that dark? Or if it is that dark, shouldn't it be a statement? Dans Le Noir. Or for boldness of intent, a bit of extra pizzazz, Dans Le Noir! Our drinks waiter explains the question is in fact an invitation. Or more accurately, a dare. Do we dare to spend two hours dining in the dark? Where our sight will be redundant? Where our other senses will take precedent? Where our life will be turned upside down? Where everything we've ever learnt will be thrown out the window?

Do we?

Do we dare..?

Well, do we!?

Yes!

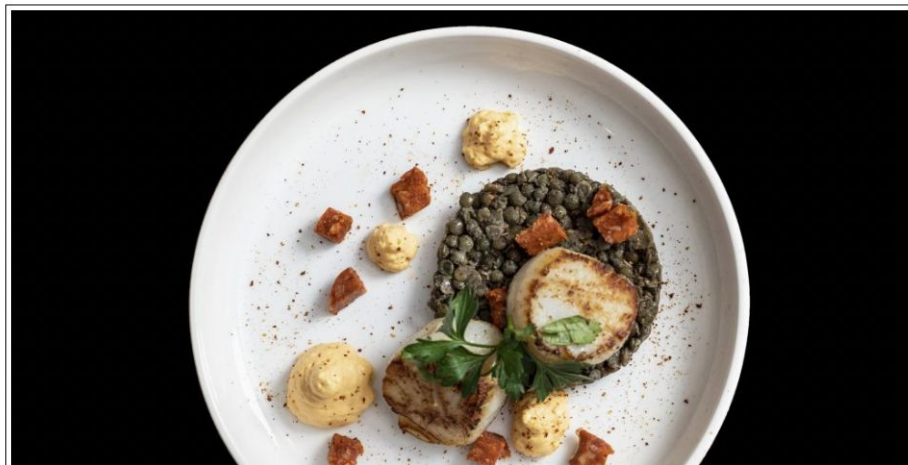
Yes! We do!

Our drinks waiter is relieved. Not everyone does dare, apparently, or if they do, it goes wrong; on average a couple of people a month cry wolf or once inside, they can't take it, just cry, have a panic attack, a meltdown, have to leave.

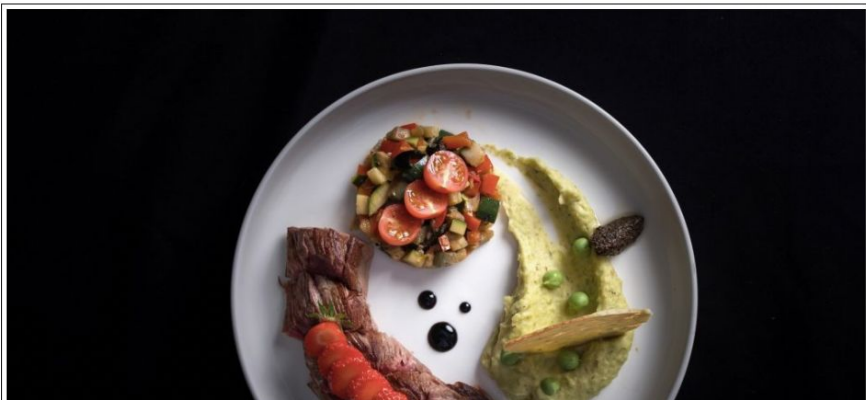
Immediately.

Our drinks waiter walks us up some stairs and, with a little more trepidation than we were expecting, we're introduced to Ghow, from Sri Lanka. Ghow is our waiter for the night and has been with the restaurant since it opened in 2006. Confident and very much in charge, Ghow wears a traditional waiter's outfit; a black three piece suit and a white shirt but also, less traditionally, shiny black sunglasses. He explains the route to the table and asks me to put my right hand on his right shoulder and my friend to put his right hand on my shoulder. This is Biblical, not metaphorical, the blind leading the blind; all waiters are either blind or strongly visually impaired. We take a right and then a left through a couple of curtained doorways and, hey presto, we are dans le noir.

Everything is black. It's no joke, no falsification. The black is pitch. It's obsidian. It's sable. There's not a chink of light, a hint of digital artefact or even an officious fire exit sign in sight. It's a convincing recreation, one assumes, of what blind people see. Or don't see. Voices chatter, cutlery scrapes, the darkness, the dark, dark, darkness, overwhelms. Ghow checks we're OK. Some people feel panicked at this stage but we're fine. We sit down with less agility than usual and greet the couple to our left who aren't interested in chatting. Tables are for six so if your party is under that, you'll most likely be sharing. Ghow hands us napkins and suggests we tuck them into our necklines, as if they were bibs. We wait for our eyes to adjust but they never do. Nothing changes. I blink my eyes. A few times; there's no difference. I have slightly orange worms swimming in my vision, my friend has green ones.



Even using a knife and fork in this environment is a challenge. You stab at the plate and hope to find food but even if you find it, you still don't necessarily lift it off the plate due to its texture. The starter is definitely fish. My friend suggests salmon but it's not. Nor is it trout or mackerel. It's a subtler fish with a meatiness which doesn't flake but requires chewing. It's accompanied by some kind of vegetable purée but again, it's impossible to say which. The only thing I'm confident of guessing is round, thin, aqueous and crunchy; a radish. Which is actually pretty weird because I don't usually eat radishes but as I write this, I'm trying to think why. Close to finishing our starter, neither of us have any idea how we know if we've finished. I hold my knife horizontally to the plate and scrape it but the noise is ugly and painful, like nails scratching on a blackboard. I don't tell my friend but throw caution to the wind and use my hands. Which feels a little rebellious and a lot of fun and means I don't waste a smidgeon of food.



Our wine is white but beyond that could be of any kind from any country. It pairs with both starters and mains, Ghow informs us. The meat is definitely chicken. Not a whole breast but chunky slices thereof. There's also a very identifiable mashed potato and a few vegetables. One vegetable is round and viscous, another longer and more solid, the third, a mixture of both. The taste should give the game away but, curiously, doesn't; for the first two, we're clueless, for the third, I'm thinking runner bean or asparagus. It's only when I fork the vegetable again that the rough texture of its head and its pointed tip confirm my suspicion: asparagus. I eat the final part of the main course with my fingers and, emboldened by the wine and the darkness, go full dog mode and lick my plate.

It's a nearby diner's 28th birthday and her table is keen to let everyone know. The restaurant duly obliges with a stirring if not raucous rendition of 'Happy Birthday' and encourages a speech. With no false modesty or tell-tale blushes to be seen here, lmy announces she's single and keen to meet any man who wants to meet her. She specifies a broad age range of 25-50 and the restaurant wolf-whistles and hollers its approval. No one volunteers but this happens again with Joe, a 22 year old guy on the table next to us. After the singing and a similar speech (one assumes he's too young for lmy), Olivia gamefully announces her interest. More whooping. More whistling. But with the whole restaurant listening, the conversation fizzles out and Joe fails to close the deal.



Dessert is a mixture of ice cream and coulis textures, presumably in boule shapes but who knows? Apple is the main flavour which stands out. There's also a sheet of sugar, kind of like what coats a toffee apple. It's like eating a harmless pane of glass but its crunchy texture makes it the dessert's stand out which, in the cold light of day, it almost certainly wouldn't be. Ghow is a constant source of care and concern and checks one last time if we're ok before he takes away our plates and asks me to put my hand back on his shoulder.

Our return of sight is a Damascus moment and one we're grateful for. At the bar, everyone's all smiles, in agreement it's been a night to remember. Our waiter reveals the menu and we congratulate ourselves for what we correctly guessed and kick ourselves for what we didn't. Joe joins us minutes later – we know what he looks like because he's already described himself to us. He looks around hopefully but Olivia's nowhere in sight.

CONTACT DETAILS

WEBSITE:

london.danslenoir.com

ADDRESS:

[69-73 St John St, London EC1M 4NJ](#)