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The dark side of the spoon: The gustatory experience of eating in a blind dining restaurant

abstract | *In this ethnographic account, a blind dining restaurant, where visually impaired people lead sighted patrons into pitch-black dining rooms and then serve as their waiters, becomes the field site for a “sensory apprenticeship,” an experiential approach to accessing sensorial, embodied, and affective ways of knowing that otherwise elude visual observation. By making several visits to restaurant and eating both mystery meals and those I selected myself, I explore “mouth sense,” an assemblage of sensory modalities—such as taste, olfaction, and touch—which is perceptually located in the mouth. In doing so, I discover the paucity of vocabulary that the English language has to describe gustatory experiences in specific and evocative ways, especially when the tastes themselves are unremarkable. I also experience how sensory systems working in concert can construct a rich portrait of a physical space even in the absence of visual information.*

keywords | *anthropology of senses; gustatory system; taste; mouth sense; blind dining.*

MOUTH SENSE: A SENSE-SCAPE DEFINED Picture the human tongue: a roughly surfaced muscle covered with moist, pink tissue and stippled with small bumps. In addition to its role in speech, the tongue churns food as we chew it and conveys masticated material to the digestive tract as we swallow. It is also responsible for gustatory perception, what we commonly refer to as taste. Taste is a chemical sense; a taste sensation is triggered by the reaction between an outside tastant—a molecule of a dissolved substance, such as food—and receptor sites on taste buds.¹ Imagine the receptor as a lock and the tastant as a key; only when a particular tastant fits into its matching receptor is a taste stimulus activated.² A neural impulse is then communicated to the brain, which in turn translates the impulse into a conscious taste perception.

Gustatory perception is limited to five recognized categories of taste: bitterness, saltiness, sourness, sweetness, and umami (a sense of ‘meatiness’).³ These tastes provide the most basic of palettes with which to identify that which we consume; however, “mouth sense”⁴ provides a more detailed sensory impression of foods and other substances. Mouth sense more accurately captures the sensorial reality

of eating and drinking as a daily activity, adding to taste perception several other sensory modalities located perceptually in the mouth: chemical sensitivity (especially through the detection of the piquancy, or “heat,” of foods like chili peppers), thermoreception (temperature), touch (including sensations of both shape and texture, by the tongue, oral cavity, and throat), and, most prominently, olfaction. The olfactory system routinely processes complex mixtures of odorants; released from a substance and forced into the nasal cavity during chewing and swallowing, these complexes enhance gustation with subtlety and nuance.⁵

However, a taste experience cannot be defined by neurochemistry and physiology alone. The philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer posits that taste is a most intimate sense, given that in knowing a material through taste, we necessarily take it into our bodies.⁶ Consequently, a taste experience is influenced not only by how the body encounters matter but also how it is interpreted culturally, understood intellectually, and experienced (and re-experienced) emotionally. We are inculcated with taboos from an early age so that the mere thought of ingesting certain substances—roadkill or human

flesh, for instance—might fill us with revulsion. While we might appreciate that the pungency of Stinking Bishop emanates only from the rind, we may still be resistant to sampling the cheese itself. The flavor of yet other stuffs might evoke vivid mental images of the past; for example, iced sugar cookies always bring to mind my mother's Christmas kitchen, no matter what time of year I might eat them.

As these examples intimate, the taste experience, while an intensely personal one (for while we can share food, we cannot share the exact same mouth sense of it), is also an inherently social activity.

This process of socializing cannot be done with human sensorial productions of noise, heat, taste, smell, spectacle, etc. (through speaking, shouting, singing... cooking, feasting, toasting... etc.) In other words, we sensorialize our world, especially through engaging in intense social activities.⁷

To understand that social encounters invariably result in the production of all manner of sensorial perceptions—sight, sound, touch, smell, proximity, movement, pain, change in temperature, taste—is to see how sharing, distributing, and withholding food, drink, tobacco, and other consumable substances can create both social ties and divisions.

For most of us, sight is usually part and parcel of these social interactions. As Korsmeyer notes, sight is also an integral component of the quotidian taste experience; that is, we typically see whatever it is we are about to put in our mouths.⁸ In fact, the visual recognition of what we are about to eat not only prepares us for the aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure) of it but also “for having the ‘correct’ experience.”⁹ We salivate at the sight of a succulent steak on the grill; we steel ourselves for the flavor of Buckley's cough syrup; we react with befuddlement, alarm, and then amusement to have swallowed a spoonful of hair mousse thinking it was whipped cream.

A SERIES OF BLIND DATES The anthropology of the senses posits that sensory perception is

both a physical and a cultural act; the senses are both physiological receptors of information and mediators of social value.¹⁰ A sensorial anthropologist explores a culture's “sensorium,” or the pattern of emphasis and meaning through which it orders its various senses. In Ghana, the sensorium of the Anlo-Ewe prioritizes bodily comportment, with kinesthetic control and balance acting culturally as measures of both aesthetics and morality.¹¹ In Western culture, where sight has long been privileged as the rational, modern, and superior sense, the sensorium is marked by a pronounced visual bias.¹² Having often heard that the human body compensates for the loss of one sense with an enhancement of those that remain, I wondered if I might be better able to explore mouth sense by bracketing out vision, given its intimate relationship with taste. So it was that I found myself visiting O.Noir, a blind dining restaurant in Toronto, Canada.

Blind dining originated in the home of Jorge Spielmann, a visually impaired Swiss pastor who would sometimes blindfold his dinner guests so that they could experience the challenges he himself faced when eating. Encouraged by his friends' response, he opened the first blind dining restaurant in Zurich in 1999. Blindekuh—which translates to “Blind Cow,” the German name for the childhood game Blind Man's Bluff—became the world's first dark restaurant. The restaurant was established in part to provide employment opportunities to blind and visually impaired people, who lead sighted patrons into pitch-black dining rooms and then serve as their waiters.¹³

Blind dining has since become one of the latest trends in the hospitality business, with the establishment of other dark restaurants in urban centers worldwide: Beijing, London, Los Angeles, Paris, New York, St. Petersburg, Sydney, Tel Aviv, and, in Canada, Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver.¹⁴ Like Blindekuh, most dark restaurants publicize their socially conscious efforts to both provide jobs for blind people, a historically underemployed demographic, and to teach the sighted about the experience of being blind. Additionally, many restaurants—and their patrons—rhapsodize about

the sensuality of eating in the dark as well as the heightening of all of their other senses.¹⁵ They also applaud the way that the darkness allows people to loosen up without embarrassment, to let go of some of their inhibitions to have a rollicking good time.¹⁶ Some restaurants pitch themselves as a respite from the visual overload of the modern cityscape. Most mention the sheer fun of eating without sight—and trying to identify the mystery meals they've been served.

My choice of a blind dining restaurant as my research site was predicated on a handful of assumptions. First, while I doubted that my nonsight senses would be heightened, I did expect that I would attend to them differently. I also suspected that eating in the dark would require more care and take more time. *Cittàslow* (City Slow), a transnational movement, encourages its participants to live more slowly, taking sensual pleasure and long-lasting enjoyment from their leisure and work activities. During her tour of a *Cittàslow* town in Wales, Pink found herself attentively and mindfully attuned with her interlocutors.¹⁷ I expected a dark restaurant would provide me with the atmosphere to come to know my sense-scape—both the flavor experience and the restaurant space itself—with that same rich, reflexive, sensory detail. Second, I would be studying what I've now come to understand as mouth sense, rather than just the tastes perceived by the tongue, as I wanted to capture a more accurate portrayal of how food and drink are experienced. Thirdly, I wanted to share the O.Noir experience with friends, to see how the social element might “flavor” my experience. Finally, I determined to focus less on identifying what foods I might be eating in the darkened restaurant and more on enriching the lexicon of words I use to describe my flavor experiences; I wanted to attempt to note my experiences of mouth sense using terminology that would both take me back to the experience and evoke my experience for others.

Over the course of my research, I visited the restaurant on three occasions. On the first visit I was accompanied by Dawn and Kevin, a married couple who had wanted to experience O.Noir since

they'd heard about it months previous; our guide that evening was Victor.¹⁸ My friend Alison joined me on my second visit; on my final visit, I dined alone. For both of those evenings, Tracey was the sole guide on the floor.

While I did not interview my friends regarding their experiences, they granted me permission to make use of any spontaneous observations they made over the course of the evening. I also participated fully in the research myself—one cannot comment on mouth sense without actually consuming food and drink, after all. I was, then, an eating ethnographer, in the same way that Caroline Potter, who undertook the very same contemporary dance training that was the subject of her research on the sensory and bodily attunements that student dancers undergo, was a dancing ethnographer.¹⁹ Like her, my method was not so much participant observation as it was what Sarah Pink calls “sensory apprenticeship.”²⁰ Such an apprenticeship represents not only “an excellent way to learn a skill: it is also an ideal way to *learn about* it, and to *learn how one learns*,”²¹ and to access sensorial, embodied, and affective ways of knowing that otherwise elude visual observation.

I neither wrote nor recorded observations during my visits but instead scribbled brief scratch notes immediately after dining, using them to write more elaborate field notes no later than the following morning. I also took from Pink that ethnographic places—and I would extend this to include sense-scapes—are “not simply made in the moments in which they are lived. Rather they are crafted over longer periods of interaction and intellectual activity.”²² Consequently, I added commentary and detail to my field notes over the course of my research period, sometimes prompted by subsequent visits to O.Noir, sometimes stirred by readings that I had done, other times occasioned by other mouth sense experiences.

PICTURING THE DARK Each visit to the restaurant began the same way: after checking our coats and placing our order with the host, my guests and I would meet our guide. We'd all introduce ourselves by first name and then queue up behind

the guide, each of us placing our right hand on the right shoulder of the person in front of us. Our guide would lead us through an initial doorway into an unlit antechamber. As the door closed behind us, we'd be engulfed by darkness. A second door would open—an action our guide would narrate for our benefit—and our assembly would pass into the blackened dining room, chugging our way past other tables until we reached our own, giggling quietly and commenting parenthetically (mostly about the darkness) as we travelled. Our guide would gently escort us one at a time to our chairs, placing our hands firmly onto the chair back so that we could each seat ourselves safely. Once we were settled, our guide noted the table setting for us: a central rubberized placemat, a fork to its left, a knife to its right, a paper serviette in the center, and a bread plate with a dollop of butter at its top. Each time, my hands would trace the location of each object; this intimate space, as wide as my shoulders and no deeper than my lower arm, became my known world. While the guide attended to other patrons, we were left to settle ourselves in.

I would like to tell you that the darkness of the O.Noir dining room was absolute, that I had never before experienced such a serene sheet of blackness, that it enveloped me utterly and completely. Instead, even though I was unable to discern even the vaguest of outlines, to *see* in any recognized sense, a random pattern of speckles danced through my visual field, like a low-contrast version of television snow back in the days of the analog signal or perhaps a pointillist rendition of the aurora borealis seen through sunglasses. Whether my eyes were opened or closed, I saw the same variegated noise. Each of my companions did as well, and this became one of the first observations each of us made: there was nothing solid or still about the “blindness” we were experiencing. Even though there was nothing to see, we were seeing something: the afterimage of so many days lived in the light? An invention of our visual cortexes? The misfiring of so many synaptic connections? I initially found myself inordinately distracted by these ever-shifting patterns of black on blacker. To contend with the distraction,

Kevin opted to sit with his eyes closed; my female companions and I preferred to keep them open. I wondered whether the patterning would go away over time. Indeed, it seemed to, but in fact whenever I thought to check this, the noise was still there. It hadn't dissipated; I'd simply acclimated.

Just as I'd expected the space to *look* like a swath of black velvet, I'd expected it to *sound* that way too: hushed and secretive, with vibrations attenuated and even distorted by the depth of the darkness. In fact, the opposite was true: the room was alive with sound. There were the normal sounds of any shared dining space—chairs scraped against the uncarpeted floor, silverware clinked, glasses chinked—but the guides were a most audible crew. They used their voices like drivers use horns, alerting one another—and their patrons—to their whereabouts with ongoing patter. The voices of our fellow diners, both in speech and in laughter, were also notable. This was especially true on my first visit: we'd anticipated being a group of six but lost three of our compatriots to other commitments. Consequently, Dawn, Kevin, and I were seated in the dining room to the right of the lobby, an area I later concluded is usually reserved for parties of four or more. Perhaps the darkness released us from our usual inhibitions about speaking too loudly, perhaps the lack of visual cues made it more difficult to recognize and maintain our personal audio space, perhaps we were energizing ourselves to combat the chilliness of the room, and perhaps the strangeness of the experience itself begged to be shared across tables, but the air here was filled with loud and spirited conversation, boisterous laughter, and the occasional squeal from patrons somehow surprised in the dark. While the tables around us seldom participated actively in one another's conversations, we did all laugh unshyly at one another's commentaries, most of which related to the dining experience: “What is this?” “What are you eating?” “This is definitely chicken ... or maybe pork,” “I think I have gravy on my face,” “What is this?” and “Have a taste,” followed by a string of instructions, interjections, and exclamations as one person attempted to share a forkful with a companion. On my subsequent two

visits—once with Alison, once solo—I was seated in what I have construed as the restaurant’s other dining room, one that seemed set up for tables of two. Pleasant, if innocuous, folk-pop bubbled into the room from an overhead speaker, obscuring individual conversations and somehow rendering the experience more intimate and insular. Still, a sense of the animation that characterized my first visit persisted, partly through the chatter Tracey carried on with each table but also through sporadic interactions with the entire room. This was particularly true when Tracey asked all of us to sing “Happy Birthday” to a fellow patron. The entire room feted Amy sonorously, more so, I suspect, than we would have had we been visible to one another.

While the vocalizations of both patrons and guides lent a convivial commensality to the O.Noir experience, I discovered that, along with incidental noises, they also helped me build a (decidedly partial) portrait of the dining room. For example, when Dawn, Kevin, and I were first seated, I determined that a table of at least four sat about eight feet to my right and that an additional table or two sat at least twice that distance away in front of me. Until another party joined us in the dining room, I was convinced that a wall stood directly behind me, even though I was unable to locate it with repeated sweeps of my arm. As a guide led that group to their seats, I could feel my conception of the room expand in size. Interestingly, that same evening, as Victor guided a group out of the dining room, one of their number accidentally flipped an emergency light switch. For a brief moment, dim light spilled into our immediate area. Dawn saw my face in profile, as I struggled to find my napkin. With peripheral vision, I saw Kevin, eyes closed, and behind him the suggestion of a wall. A wall? Ultimately, that split second of light added nothing—save perhaps some confusion—to my image of the dining room. I understood, in the most rudimentary of ways, how it might be that a man who had regained sight after years of blindness suddenly found “his house and its contents unintelligible”;²³ a space is fashioned much differently in the imagination when it is heard rather than seen.

My conception of the dining areas consolidated on my second visit; Alison and I were estimating the number of occupied tables in the room. We listened for conversations taking place around us, almost intuitively distinguishing one table from another by how those voices were positioned in relation to our own by both distance and direction. It suddenly seemed to me that it was as though we were watching a stage play that featured several discrete settings; each time dining companions spoke, it was as if a tight pool of light were cast upon their table, bringing them out of the dark and into existence. The space between tables—more generous than usual in restaurants—was a kind of terra incognita, traversed only by our guides. It strikes me, of course, that this image of the space depends on a visual analogy. Dining in the dark is just too temporary and superficial an encounter with blindness—and the ocularcentrism of Western society too omnipotent—to teach its participants how it is that sight-impaired people might construe the world.

Leaving the dining room after each visit was the inverse of our entrance: with left hand on the left shoulder of the person in front of us and our guide in the lead, we conga-lined our way from the room through the antechamber and into the lobby, which, though softly lit, seemed overly bright when we re-entered the light.

PLAYING WITH OUR FOOD At O.Noir, patrons choose between a three-course meal (starter, entrée, and dessert) and a two-course meal (entrée plus either starter or dessert). Additionally, they are invited either to order from the menu or to opt for the daily off-menu surprise dishes.

On my first visit, Dawn, Kevin and I all selected the three-course surprise meal, vegetarian for me and meat for them. When our starter arrived, we were all momentarily at a loss, uncertain exactly how to proceed. Middle-class North American etiquette dictated that we not use our hands, while at the same time, the notion of stabbing in the general direction of an unknown appetizer with a fork was rife with potential embarrassment. After some hesitation, we all began to play with our food. I first

dabbed my index finger lightly over the surface of my plate, getting a sense of the texture, temperature, and quantity of food there: a soft mound of cooked shapes topped with a thick and slightly gritty sauce sat on a bed of wilted greens. The entire assemblage was lukewarm. I then pinched one of the nickel-like shapes between my thumb and index finger and conveyed it to my mouth.

“Root vegetables.”²⁴

“Yeah, me too. Carrots, maybe?”

“Or a potato? It would be bland without the sauce.”

“Well, that was a parsnip.”

“Parsnips?”

“Yup, definitely a parsnip.”

“And arugula—peppery, and that bitter aftertaste.”

And so it went: we would nibble at the starter, try to identify its major components by texture, taste, and shape, and then share our discoveries. The sauce was the most challenging to identify: an acerbic but mellow bite, an astringent pull, and a grainy meatiness—perhaps a balsamic vinaigrette chock-a-block with grated Parmesan? It was so flavorful that I sopped up the excess with my roll and swallowed it down.

Almost as quickly as we'd finished our starter, Victor arrived to clear our plates and, minutes later, returned with our entrées. Again, I dabbed my finger around my plate, detecting through touch a mess of saucy vegetables arranged around a pillow of short-grained rice. Though it was sufficiently warm, I knew I'd need to eat steadily to finish it before it grew unappetizingly cool. Still using my fingers, I found a bean, which I judged to be a green bean from its slightly stringy texture, then a carrot nickel and a floret of broccoli.

“Have you tried your fork yet? It's actually pretty easy.”

I switched to my fork. Trying to eat the soft white rice with my fingers had begun to feel rather undignified anyway. I ate cauliflower, potato, and more broccoli, all sautéed to a soggy softness, much of their inherent flavor muted in the process. The sauce, though, the same one served over the salad, was savory on my tongue. On the whole, it

was a palatable, if unremarkable, stir-fry. Dawn and Kevin, meanwhile, had determined that they'd been served mildly spicy butter chicken with white (rather than the more traditional basmati) rice.

Victor removed our plates, returning quickly to announce the arrival of our desserts and dessert spoons. The bowl was cold, so we all immediately suspected ice cream. A spoonful of the stuff—pliable, creamy, redolent with vanilla—and we knew we were right. Yet buried under the silky-smooth ice cream was a chunk of firm but juicy flesh. We each struggled to break off a piece with our spoons, identifying it first as some sort of exotic fruit from its perfumed bouquet and then realizing that the spices—cinnamon, perhaps a dash of nutmeg—had deceived us.

“Pear?”

“Maybe, but it doesn't seem quite granular enough.”

“Apple, then?”

“Sure, apple.”

Later that night, while assembling my field notes, I was surprised to see how readily we'd all fallen into the habit of deconstructing what we had on our plates, trying to determine what the component ingredients were, rather than trying to describe the flavor sensations we'd experienced.

Alison and I visited O.Noir a few days later. We both opted for the two-course surprise: a vegetarian dish and dessert for me, a meat dish and dessert for her. Just as Dawn, Kevin, and I had done, we focused on identifying what it was we were eating, rather than meditating on the flavor profiles of which it was composed. I had another stir-fry, with a sauce more piquant than umami; she had sliced chicken breast with green beans and roasted potatoes. For dessert, we both had baked apple with ice cream. Again, when elaborating my field notes, I was disappointed to see I'd again missed the opportunity to exercise my vocabulary for describing the sum of my meal rather than its parts.

Korsmeyer suggests that this is a natural response.²⁵ A taster can exercise both inward and outward intentionality; that is, a taste sensation can draw the taster's attention to her own body, to the appreciation of a flavor and its

effect on her own body, or it can serve a cognitive function, directing the taster's attention to acts of discovering and identifying substances out in the world. Without knowing what it is we are eating, we are unable to say with certainty that it is not a prohibited food, that it is a food for which we have an affinity, or that it is a food that stimulates memory for us. Not only can we not avoid those foods that disgust us, we can't even fully enjoy what might normally give us great pleasure. Consequently, to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of what we eat, we must first be able to identify it: outward intentionality, then inward enjoyment.

Perhaps I needed a different approach to the blind dining experience to encourage the development of vocabulary for communicating mouth sense.

STRUGGLING FOR WORDS I felt self-conscious in the lobby, standing alone as I waited to place my order while other patrons milled around flush with the first of holiday cheer. I'd already determined to order from the menu on my final visit to O.Noir; I would know what I was eating, so I could attend to articulating my flavor experience more mindfully than I had during previous visits. I placed my order quickly and hoped to be escorted into the (seeming) solitude of the dining room without too much awkward delay.

Initially I felt like a voyeur, sitting solo in the dark dining room while couples sat in conversation at tables around me. However, cloaked by both the darkness—no one could see me—and the folk-pop on the stereo—no one could hear me—I quickly became comfortable in my invisibility. I acclimated to the visual static more quickly than in the past. Once Tracey brought my entrée to the table—pasta with light tomato sauce and vegetables—I was ready to begin assessing, appreciating, and describing my meal: warm and slippery rotini noodles with an ever-so-slight al dente crunch, pasta just on the right side of being overcooked; a zesty sauce rounded out with a hint of citrus and a dash of heat; chunks of meaty mushrooms, fat slivers of (what I assumed to be) mellow onion, florets of barely bitter broccoli, and

mushy, tasteless bits of some nameless vegetable; a generous sprinkling of savory grated cheese. I followed the entrée with dark chocolate mousse and a cup of coffee. Rich, velvety, and gooey, the mousse clung to my fork and then to my teeth, where it melted in a rush of mingled sweet and bitter. Some lodged in the back of my mouth, in the flaps left over from a wisdom tooth extraction the week before. I twisted my tongue to loosen it and nudged the stitches, unleashing a metallic tang, a jolt of irritable red. The coffee was surprisingly strong, made bittersweet by the addition of sugar and cream. I was reminded vaguely of the small cups of dark coffee I drank while travelling Ethiopia, though this coffee was much harsher and lacked that indelible honeyed aftertaste.

And still I found myself speaking of the flavor experience through the components that make a meal, in words that lack specificity and evocation! Part of my dilemma stemmed from the ordinariness of meals that blind dining establishments tend to prepare so that people can determine what they are eating;²⁶ it is difficult to describe the unremarkable in unique and memorable ways. However, I suspect that a deeper cultural explanation—namely, the historical subordination of the sense of taste in the West—is also at fault. Sutton notes that studies of North American restaurant workers, even chefs, indicate that when they speak of the food they prepare, they use other superlatives—“That was exquisite!” “That was cruddy!”—or express themselves in similes and metaphors.²⁷ Conversely, Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that Chinese languages feature an extraordinarily rich lexicon for describing taste and texture, a vocabulary that is used not only by chefs and gourmards but also in everyday parlance.²⁸

AFTERTASTES As this account makes obvious, dining blind did not prompt me to dispense with identifying the foods that I was eating—even when I knew what the dish I was to be served was—in lieu of describing the flavors themselves; in fact, it seemed that precisely the opposite happened. In part, I needed to know precisely what I had put into my mouth in order to respond to its

aesthetic qualities in a way consistent with my cultural mores and my own personal preferences. Furthermore, my ability to articulate my mouth sense experiences—especially the ordinariness of the foods I'd been served—was hampered by the lack of a specific and evocative vocabulary with which to share it in memorable ways.

Although my research was focused primarily on my own phenomenological and social experience of O.Noir, it was inevitable that my companions and I were also curious about staff experience at the restaurant, from questions of practicality to those of agency: How do guides “see” the food to serve it? Is it liberating to work at a job from which they would typically be excluded? I searched the Internet for interviews with blind dining guides only to find that, in article after article, blind dining is discussed almost exclusively from the patron's perspective.²⁹ Yet guides are fundamental to the experience, using voice and touch to guide visitors through the restaurant, to announce their presence at the table, and to calm and reassure guests unnerved by the darkness. As Gill notes, guides not only need to be legally blind:

*they also have to have a gentle touch, a sense of humor, a commanding voice, the nimbleness not to knock customers in the head and the graciousness to baby needy patrons while juggling a four-table section.*³⁰

Despite this, in the few interviews I found, servers either reported patrons' reactions to the dark dining experience or spoke only about how such restaurants allow them to be employed in a service position usually denied them³¹—not about the tactical, emotional, and financial realities of their work. Tamara Tedesco, once a guide at Vancouver's Dark Table, intimates that she sees waiting tables as a rite of passage: “It is a job I always wanted to be able to do—it's something people always seem to do at some point in their lives.”³² At the time that she was interviewed, Tedesco had a full-time communications job with a Canada-wide nonprofit. For her, then, working at a dark dining restaurant was less about making

money than it was about obtaining an experience common to many of her peers.

While I'd intended O.Noir to be an exploration of literal taste, the kind that takes place in the mouth, it also caused me to reflect on taste as the power and practice of discerning excellence while also calling into question the socially conscious aspirations of blind dining establishments. Providing an underemployed demographic with jobs in the hospitality industry, a sector recognized for its low wages, difficult hours, and drudgery, is a dubious good. Given the pedestrian quality of the dining room fixtures—the kind of seating found in hotel conference rooms and inexpensive veneer-topped tables—and the workaday cuisine for the relatively high prix fixe, I can't help but see the restaurant as an explicitly ambitious business intent on turning a healthy profit. The assumption that patrons and—especially—guides will not notice the effects such cost-savings measures have on the atmosphere of the place simply because they can't see them is, to me, a huge oversight.

Moreover, I wonder how much the dark dining experience can teach the sighted about the living with blindness. The anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests that sensory responses can be nuanced by their practical apprenticeship within a specific community of practice:³³ for example, cardiac doctors cultivate distinctive techniques of listening to diagnose their patients' heart conditions.³⁴ I would suggest that blindness itself is kind of life-long apprenticeship, with visually impaired people developing, practicing, and polishing their capacity to “see” without sight. However, such sensorial knowledge is acquired over a significant period of time. Blindness over course of a meal or two is a novelty, not an education.

NOTES

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16. Andrew Yang, "Waiter, I'm at Your Mercy," *New York Times*, July 22, 2007. <http://travel.nytimes.com/2007/07/22/travel/22surfacing.html?r=0>.
17. Sarah Pink, "An Urban Tour: The Sensory Sociality of Ethnographic Place-Making," *Ethnography* 9, no. 2 (2008).
18. Although O.Noir refers to their wait staff as "servers," I've opted to call them "guides" as an acknowledgement of the more complex relationship engendered by dining in the dark: patrons entrust their guides to steer them through the unlit space and through the experience of dining and socializing without sight.
19. Caroline Potter, "Sense of Motion, Senses of Self: Becoming a Dancer," *Ethnos* 73, no. 4 (2008).
20. Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Anthropology* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 69.
21. Greg Downey, *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 53.
22. Pink, "An Urban Tour," 190.
23. Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996), 127.
24. Any conversation reported here is not a verbatim transcript but instead a reconstruction of the discussion Dawn, Kevin, and I had at the restaurant.
25. Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*.
26. Fabricant, "At Dans Le Noir"; "Dining in the Dark."
27. David E. Sutton, "Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home," in Carolyn Korsmeyer, *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007).
28. Yi-Fi Tuan, "Pleasures of the Proximate Senses: Eating, Taste, and Culture," in Carolyn Korsmeyer, *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007): 226-236.
29. Numerous articles about the blind dining experience can be found in online newspapers, magazines, and blogs. A sampling of those I have referred to include Catherine Allman, "Dining in the Dark at Concept Eatery Dark Table," *Vancouver Weekly*, October 11, 2012, <http://vancouverweekly.com/dining-in-the-dark-at-concept-eatery-dark-table/>; Richard Aston, "Review of Nox: Dine in the Dark, 269 Beach Road, Singapore," *The Dark Smile* (blog), "Dining in the Dark" September 10, 2014, <http://www.thedarksmile.com/blog/review-of-nox-dine-in->

- the-dark-269-beach-road-singapore; Fabricant, "At Dans Le Noir"; Alexandra Gill, "Pitch-Black Dark Table Misses the Mark," *The Globe and Mail*, January 25, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/food-and-wine/restaurant-reviews/pitch-black-dark-table-misses-the-mark/article7889819/>; Jen (hklovebites), "Alchemy—Dinner in the Dark," *Love Bites* (blog), July 2, 2014, <http://hklovebites.com/2014/07/02/alchemy-dinner-in-the-dark/>; Liane Katz, "Dining in the Dark," *The Guardian*, March 1, 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2006/mar/01/restaurants.london>; Yang, "Waiter, I'm at Your Mercy."
30. Gill, "Pitch-Black Dark Table."
 31. Night Guide, "Dining in the Dark"; Gillian Shaw, "Diners in the Dark at a New Blind Restaurant in Kitsilano," *The Vancouver Sun*, September 6, 2012, <http://www.vancouversun.com/health/Diners+dark+blind+restaurant+Kitsilano/7196261/story.html>.
 32. Shaw, "Diners in the Dark."
 33. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).
 34. Tom Rice, *Hearing the Hospital: Sound, Listening, Knowledge and Experience* (Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston Press, 2013).