

What a concept!

Three new dining ventures delve into darkness, the inner mind and... sugar. An adventure.

By Nanci Tangeman

Photos by Krista van der Niet



To my knowledge, I've never visited a restaurant that's been reviewed in a psychology journal. And I've never considered how a flashlight might enhance my dining experience. And frankly, I've never stayed up late just to eat dessert. But three concept restaurants in Amsterdam recently provided me and my partner-in-all-things-adventurous with those opportunities and more. Two of the dining ventures, I must say, should never, ever be combined: eating in a completely dark room, defenceless and humbled; and dining at a restaurant staffed by people dealing with psychiatric issues. The third, a Mecca for dessert and cocktail lovers, should be combined with every night out.

Sensual explosion of flavour—or fad?

Tonight, my partner-in-all-things and I explore Ctaste, a restaurant that's completely dark, with waiters who are visually-impaired or even totally blind. Ctaste say that the flavour, aroma and texture of our meal will come alive in the dark. I say I'd like to smuggle in a flashlight.

In Ctaste's bright, modern lobby we begin our journey to the dark side by abandoning all our belongings to a locker. So much for my flashlight contraband. Then we meet our waiter.

Jeroen is tall and personable with a Ray Charles tilt to his head. He can see about 15 per cent of what we can see outside of the dining room. Inside, he'll have the advantage. We're about to enter a different world—and we do it via conga line.

Hands on each others' shoulders, with Jeroen in the lead and partner-in-all bringing up the rear, we shuffle into the dining room. Three heavy curtains later, we're in the pitch blackness of the restaurant. Jeroen stops us at a seemingly random spot and, sure enough, here's our table. I feel my way into a chair, and partner sits down beside me (no gazing into each other's eyes tonight).

The darkness is strangely claustrophobic and disorienting. It's not until I glimpse a tiny illicit slit of light at the doorway that I feel secure. Wine helps, too.

But first Jeroen has to get the wine glasses into our hands. He explains that he'll be wearing a bell so we'll always know when he's near. Each time he approaches our table he speaks to us by name. It will be the most personal service I've experienced in Amsterdam.

When we're comfortable, he brings us our first course. The menu is a surprise. Part of the shtick is that we're supposed to be able to use our other senses to identify and experience the pleasures of our meal. It would be easier with my flashlight.

I manoeuvre my fork around the giant plate. After a few quiet taps, I empathise with the white canes of the world. I spear a mound of something and guide it carefully to my lips, concentrating more on the route of the fork than the size of its load. It's a big load. A big, cool, mushy load. And it completely fills up my mouth.

Partner-in-adventure asks me what I think it is. I cast him an unseen look of distress. He asks me again. '*Phlmerkn!*' I answer, in a panic.

I've spent almost a decade in Amsterdam and have managed to avoid *phlmerkn*, I mean, filet American, that barbaric mixture of raw hamburger and spices. Until tonight. I chew. I concentrate very hard on swallowing. I find my glass of wine that I've strategically set at 12 o'clock on my plate and drain it.

Although I'm sworn to secrecy about the menu, I can tell you about my filet américain experience—because it wasn't filet américain. And here is my first realisation of the evening: I cannot recognise

food without my flashlight. For a foodie, this is humbling.

It's even more humbling when partner-in-all-things correctly identifies what I've just stuffed into my mouth. (At least it's not filet américain.) My next realisation is that nobody can see me. I'm free to cram my napkin into my collar and abandon my cutlery. I feel around my plate. Something moist here. A firm stack of something else there. Some wobbly bits in the corner. And so the meal goes.

As much as the menu is touted at Ctaste, the evening is not about the food, it's about the darkness. If my sense of sight is gone, my sense of hearing is enhanced. A woman at a distant table whoops and laughs louder than she might if dirty looks could be thrown her way. At one point, we hear another diner choking. We half expect a wad of meat to whiz by when someone at her table mentions the Heimlich manoeuvre. We listen with relief as she seems to recover. Or maybe she just passes out.

In all, the evening is the adventure we're after. We learn a little. We laugh a lot. And I am pleased to say that next time, I'll leave my flashlight at home.

Histrionic personality disorder—or just friendly?

Our waiter is attentive. He puts coasters under our table's legs to keep it from wobbling. He brings us a pitcher of ice water without our asking. He wants us to be comfortable. In any other Amsterdam cafe, this would make me suspicious. At Restaurant Freud, it makes me diagnose.

We listen as our attentive waiter explains the establishment: Restaurant Freud was founded by cooking teacher Gerda Hahn and psychologist Renske Kastelein to help people with psychiatric backgrounds feel part of the community. As he speaks, I rearrange my cutlery. The crew is made up of about 45 people, he says, from those who can manage only a few hours a week cleaning windows, to others who can handle the stress of the kitchen or even the demanding public. I position my water glass exactly above my knives.

He tells us how diners stare at him, trying to figure out his affliction. Histrionic personality disorder, I decide. A peculiar need to please people. I meticulously line up the two forks on the left.

Then he mentions that he is a coach, one of the few paid positions, working with the volunteer staff.

As he brings our wine—a cool Argentinean Sauvignon Blanc—and takes our orders, I watch him closely. I change my diagnosis. Couldn't he just as well be a pathological liar than the staff coach? I line up my wine glass with my water glass.

Is it my imagination, or is the staff watching me back? Someone new brings us our mezes. They have interesting spices and textures—gambas, carpaccio and incredible marinated eggplant. Where did our friendly waiter go? Did they send him to a little room in the back? I rotate my plate and think how my own list of symptoms is growing. I wonder if they'll offer me a discount.

Another staffer brings our main course. The poussin is tender and juicy. They have run out of the lamb rather early in the evening, but the bio-beefsteak is sliced, seasoned and tender as well.

If not for the few short paragraphs at the front of the menu and the hint in the restaurant name, diners wouldn't be able to tell Restaurant Freud was anything but good food. Set on the busy Spaarndammerstraat at the edge of Westerpark, sidewalk tables are tucked into the traffic of the neighbourhood, amid a diverse parade of residents. Inside, fresh green graphics on the wall set off the crisp white linens and contemporary decor.

The website is much more blatant. It makes light of the staff's afflictions in a very politically incorrect way: 'Our bartender has ADHD!' 'Our waiter has a screw loose!' 'Reserve your table today! It's going to be a madhouse!' Indeed, Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights are usually fully booked.

And as for the claims that 'the cook has mood swings'? No one who's ever worked in a kitchen (or watched a reality chef show, for that matter) would be surprised.

But to me it's more fun to make my own subtle diagnoses. After all, a friendly attentive waiter in Amsterdam just isn't normal. Then again, I suspect someone in that back room is diagnosing me, too. And maybe they're preparing to offer me a job.

Sweet tooth fantasy—or far more?

My very first pay check came from scooping ice cream. It was the best job I've ever had. I didn't make much money, but I got to eat all my mistakes.

As a 16-year-old slinging ice cream, I learned a thing or two about banana splits. How to slice a banana, touching only the skin. How to form perfect 70-gram scoops. How to get a maraschino



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cherry to keep from sliding down the hot fudge. It took a lot of practice, but I enjoyed a steady diet of ice cream blunders.

So there's a bit of nostalgia at play as I order the Pacific Style Marinated Banana Split at Sucre, a dessert restaurant and cocktail bar near the Vondelpark. The description sounds like one of my mistakes: banana marinated in rum with lime zest, coriander and vanilla/banana ice cream. This is not the banana split of my youth.

Of course, that's a good thing. The flavour combination of Sucre's banana split is subtle and surprising, as are the textures. It'll more than do, even without the maraschino cherry. And, unlike my teenage creations, Sucre's banana split is not the least bit sweet. That's not a minor point. This dessert restaurant is not just for people with a sweet tooth.

Early in the evening, Sucre offers four- or five- course dinner menus with up to four dessert courses: sweet dessert courses, unsweet dessert courses and cheese courses. Around half past nine, the menu changes to desserts only—but even then they range from sweet, to cheese plates, to practically savoury.

Sucre opened about three months ago in what's been dubbed the Olympic Quarter. Other new restaurants such as Ron Blaauwe's Sophia are also opening up next to pet stores and dry cleaners in the neighbourhood. The off-Centrum location doesn't bother owner Martijn Machielse: 'It's like having a girlfriend in Australia—if you love her, you'll still visit her.' Sucre is a lot closer than Australia. And it seems to be the only establishment on Amstelveenseweg with a velvet rope. But ignore that velvet rope. And when you're inside, ignore the sensuous black and white photos on the walls. Ignore the feel of the heavy crystal tumbler in your hand. At Sucre, it's all about the food.

Chef de Cuisine Peter Scholte, who came to Sucre after cooking his way around the world (including at two Michelin-starred restaurants), says what he always missed was a restaurant that gave the same attention to desserts as to the rest of the menu. As you'd expect, he's lavished the Sucre carte with attention.

Everyone in the place seems excited about those desserts. Asked about a favourite creation, our waiter says he leans towards the honey-baked apple with vanilla ice cream and cinnamon sabayon or the bread-apple-and-butter-pudding with cinnamon ice cream and Calvados. 'I like a nice baked apple. I guess I really just miss my granny's apple cake.'

Let me be clear about another thing: neither of these dishes is his granny's apple cake. Machielse explains that although he and business partner Eline Kok (from restaurant Bloesem) want to offer dishes that people recognise (bread pudding, banana splits, baked apples), they want to do their own thing with them—give them an edge. 'Dessert should make you go 'WOW!' After all, this is the way you're closing your night.'

After being wowed into the early hours, our only regret of the evening is that the infamous Chocolate Box, with its gold leafed walls, is unavailable. Apparently, the delicate dessert won't hold up to tonight's humidity. Chef Peter won't serve it if it's not perfect. As we close down the restaurant and they lock the doors behind us, I can't help wondering about that chocolate box—and if Chef Peter is downstairs in the kitchen, eating his mistake.

Ctaste

Amsteldijk 55, 06 22 33 53 66

www.ctaste.nl

Surprise 3-course menu with fish and vegetarian options. €39.50. Optional €12.50 wine pairing.

Restaurant Freud

Spaardammerstraat 424, 688 5548

www.restaurantfreud.nl

Dinner for two, with wine, around €75. Cash only.

Sucre

Amstelveenseweg 152, 470 1910

www.sucreresaurant.nl

Dessert for two, with digestives, €70
