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*A Restaurant Creates  
A Buzz, or Is It Just  
A Fly in the Soup?*

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Eatery Operated by the Blind Keeps Diners  
in the Dark; Yelling for a Glass of Wine

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By JANE COSTELLO  
WSJ.COM

ZURICH—Nothing looks good: to eat at the  
Blind Cow restaurant.

It's not that the pan-fried trout with boiled  
potatoes and the red snapper with green lentils  
are bad. It's just impossible to see the dishes or  
the plates they are on.

Or the silverware.

Or anything at all.

That's because patrons at this eatery in this  
pristine Swiss city dine in total darkness and  
place their trust in the hands of bartenders,  
cooks and waitresses, almost all of whom are  
blind.

Named for the Swiss game of blind man's  
bluff, Blind Cow is the brainchild of the Rev.  
Jorge Spielmann, a 37-year-old blind pastor who  
has been known to blindfold his dinner guests  
just for fun. Mr. Spielmann was inspired to  
open the restaurant while volunteering to tend  
bar at a 1998 public exhibit in Zurich where  
sighted people groped their way through various  
dark rooms to catch a glimpse of what it means  
to be blind. After-serving up drinks in the dark,  
Mr. Spielmann saw the light.

"For once, you couldn't tell the difference  
between the hobby blind and the professional  
blind," he says. "I wanted that feeling to  
continue."

**Dark Motives**

Mr. Spielmann and four blind colleagues set  
out to establish a restaurant that would provide  
jobs for blind and visually impaired people  
while giving the sighted the chance to appreciate  
the skills required to cope in the dark. After  
raising an initial 300,000 Swiss francs (about  
\$170,000) in donations from local businesses  
and charities, Mr. Spielmann found space in an  
unused Lutheran church.

The 60-seat restaurant opened in September  
1999. Poetically situated at the crest of a blind  
curve in a quiet residential neighborhood, the  
restaurant has stained glass windows that are  
ablaze in the evenings and a spotlight that shines  
over the heavy wooden doors. At first glance,  
the well-lit reception room looks like any other,  
with a menu written on a large chalkboard, and a  
receptionist seated in front of a telephone and  
cash register.

But any similarities end when a blind  
waitress arrives with bells on her toes to usher  
diners into the darkness. One guest is told to  
place both hands on her shoulders, while other  
members of the party follow in kind. She leads  
them through blackened curtains to a dimmed  
holding area where they get a rundown of the  
rules: no smoking, no iridescent watches, no  
flashlights and, above all, no wandering.  
Guests, who need to use the lighted restrooms  
must wait for her to lead them, to and fro. Any  
requests during the meal are to be made by  
shouting to summon the bell-wearing staff.

The bells also serve to allow the waitstaff to  
avoiding colliding with each other with plates of  
hot food. "We still bump into each other a lot,"  
says Christine Wegmueller, a 29-year-old music  
student who has been a waitress at Blind Cow  
since it opened.

Once the ground rules are explained, guests parade through the pitch black to their tables, as the waitress explains where the chairs and place settings are located. The staff says there is no more breakage at Blind Cow than at any other restaurant, since customers are extraordinarily careful not to knock anything over.

Once seated, customers place orders and then sit back to feast on their remaining four senses. When the meal is over, diners tread lightly to a lighted reception desk, where people blink their eyes, pay the bill and stuff tips in a piggybank shaped like a blindfolded cow. “It’s very noisy in there,” says Blind Cow patron Patricia Sennhauser, who heard about the restaurant from a friend and decided to make a reservation for lunch. “It was so loud, it was difficult to hear my companion. I found myself leaning forward as if I were blind.”

Another first-time customer had a hard time remembering what she ate, since she spent so much time concentrating on how to eat it. “It was easier than I thought it would be, but I kept touching my eyes to make sure they were still there,” says Iris Voegelin, who came to dine with a group of co-workers. “I’m happy I still can see.”

Most customers agree that the menu of modestly priced German specialties is secondary to the atmosphere—or lack of it—and that they come mainly for the experience. Mr. Spielmann says his biggest fear was that the novelty would wear off, and Blind Cow would close down in three months. Instead, every seat is booked for dinner through March.

“At this point, customers have seen it all,” says Blind Cow’s manager, Adrian Schaffner, who thinks that the concept could be a hit in cities like New York and Los Angeles, where sophisticated diners hunger for new experiences. “To be successful in the restaurant business, it’s not just food and drink; you need a message.”

And an open mind. In order for the Blind Cow concept to catch on, experience junkies will need to check their table manners at the door, since dining in darkness invites the temporarily blind to eat like cavemen while avoiding any social repercussions over poor manners. Some diners confess to wiping mouths or mustaches on sleeves. Nobody worries about being seen using the wrong fork, either.

Others take short cuts. “It’s hard for people to use knives, especially when they order meat,” explains Ms. Wegmueller. “Lots of times, they pick it up and eat it by hand. It’s easier that way.”

Some customers use the cover of darkness to have a little fun. Consider three couples who sat down for dinner recently. When the women left to go to the washroom, the men changed seats. When the women returned, each man leaned over to plant a kiss on the lips of his unsuspecting companion. “One woman said, ‘Stop! You’re not my husband,’” laughs Ms. Wegmueller. “But another one couldn’t tell the difference and those two just kept on kissing.”

Inevitably someone would use the restaurant for, yes, a blind date. The woman came in first; she nursed her drink in the dark, and the man was led in to meet her a half-hour later. To the disappointment of the staff, the couple left separately, without having laid eyes on each other.

Mr. Schaffner sees a bright spot in the story—and a way to market Blind Cow. Starting next March, he plans to make Monday night “date night,” complete with guest speakers to discuss sex and relationships. “People can ask all kinds of questions in the dark,” he says.