



## **Dinner in the Dark for Social Inclusion**

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### **1. What's a dinner in the dark ?**

A dinner in the dark is a usual dinner which is served in a complete dark environment where no light is allowed. Blind waitress serve the dinner because only people who don't see can move without impairment in a complete dark environment.

Firstly people decide to take part to this event for curiosity, pushed by a sense of adventure, but even worried by this uncommon situation.

To tranquilise people who take part, we say that's a kind of game, but an educational game very interesting: our society is based mostly on sight and the others 4 sense are at least ignored; during the dinner instead, the situation is different and participants must abandoned their sight to use only touch, hear, smell , and taste. These 4 sense will give them the possibility to live all the emotions that this experience can offer: tasting the savour of the dinner, the food, succeeding into pouring beverages and eating correctly talking with the others and exchanging opinions.

Even if this is a short experience that lasts only two hours, maximum three, the aim is to explain all the participants and invite them to reflect on the fact that a blind or visually impaired person are person like them; it only has needs that the whole community must respect, such as parking cars well, not leaving bicycles and mopeds in inappropriate places, keeping sidewalks clean, making the city more beautiful and more liveable for everyone.

## **2. How do you organize a dinner in the dark and what do you need to organize it?**

Normally these dinners are organized by blind or visually impaired people belonging to associations, such as Italian Union of the Blind - Florence, or to sports groups for the visually impaired, etc.

In our case we can organize dinners in environments at our disposal and that we have now considered suitable, but we are often also called by other associations, clubs or owners of premises, who wish to organize this event in their spaces. In this case we must evaluate the suitability of the environment, because special requirements are needed: the room must be large enough to allow the waiters to accompany guests and serve them without too many impairments. The room must not have glass walls and in any case there must be no light sources outside. There should be few windows and glass doors.

The room where dinner is served must be separated from the kitchen where it is essential to keep the light switched on. In the stretch from the kitchen to the dining room there must be no steps, in order to easily transport the dishes with a cart.

The room must be perfectly darkened, not even a very small light must filter through; for this reason even a small LED must be plugged, like any warning light or emergency light; because at first it may seem a harmless luminous dot, but after a few minutes, when the eye has become accustomed to the dark, even a small light can illuminate the environment and make the shapes and contours of objects and people perceive.

### **How do you make dark a room?**

Several meters of black waxed cloth, the one used in agriculture, and rolls of paper tape, the one used by coachbuilders, are used to darken a room.

With the cloth and with the tape that fixes it to the walls or the floor, all the doors, windows and any light are covered.

Special preparation is reserved for the door through which guests enter and, if it is not the usual one, also the door through which the food prepared by the kitchen enters. In this case we build a small room called "Compass" type entrance, about two meters long, one meter and 30 wide and two meters high (but adapt to the characteristics of the environment). This small room is built with a frame of aluminium poles, where walls of sturdy black fabric are spread, joined together with Velcro; two sides of this box, however, are not made up of fixed walls, but of two large overlapping tents, through these tents the guests in small groups will be introduced into the dining room. Even the box must be perfectly darkened, it must, in fact, act as a barrier between the illuminated external environment and the completely dark dining room.

### **Preparation of the room**

Inside the room the tables are prepared according to the number of participants. It is decided whether to prepare large or small tables, in agreement with the organizers, and considering the needs of the room.

The tables are set with tablecloths, napkins, cutlery and glasses, a bottle of wine, water and possibly sparkling water (making it recognizable to the touch from the natural one).

Each table has a free head of the table which corresponds to where the waiters are positioned to distribute the dishes; at that point, for the convenience of those serving, a number in Braille or in relief is attached to the tablecloth that identifies that particular table.

Inside the kitchen, ready-made dishes are placed on the card, which are then brought into the room by the waiters, paying attention to the passage through the box, the curtains are opened on one side, the trolley is inserted into the box and they close the curtains. Only at this point do the curtains on the opposite wall open to introduce the trolley into the room. The curtains of the two opposite walls, therefore, must be opened alternately, otherwise the external light would penetrate into the room.

If the bathroom is inside the dining room it is necessary to evaluate if there are two doors, otherwise by applying curtains that go from the ceiling to the floor we must make sure that there are the two openings that open alternately, so that we can keep the room dark even when someone goes to the bathroom.

If the room presents particular orientation difficulties for blind waiters, such as being very large or round or irregular in shape, tactile references are placed on the floor, such as ropes and wooden tablets attached with tape that form a guide that the waiter perceives with his foot and directs it towards the tables and towards the various exits.

### **Reservations and particular care to any kind of allergies.**

Participants' reservation have to be taken with extremely attention : we have to consider relatives or friends to allocate them in tables, but especially have to write any particular request: such as celiac people or vegetarians.

### **3. In the heart of a dinner in the dark**

#### **Entrance into the hall and first steps in the dark.**

Participants reach the venue about 20 minutes before the time set for the start of dinner, they wait for everyone to arrive, they are welcomed in an entrance or in an adjacent room, in which panels have also been placed to be able to convey through drawings and written flash information about dinners in the dark and the blind.

At this point the participants are invited to pay attention and briefly explained to them what the experience they will live consists of: it is a small adventure, a very interesting game, where if they want they can perceive many sensations and reflect. However, the evening can only be successful if everyone works together, the darkness must be respected in all ways, mobile phones and any other light source, such as watches, must remain hidden or put in the bag. If there is an urgent need to make a phone call, the guest notifies the waiter, and he will be taken out immediately to meet this need.

The waiters must present themselves in an appropriate way, they must convey tranquillity and must demonstrate that they have the situation always under control and that they are always able to face any inconvenience. All this, of course, is achieved with experience. In fact, those who are at the beginning are always joined by more experienced waiters. The aesthetic aspect must also demonstrate professionalism: the waiters all wear a uniform consisting of black trousers, waistcoat and bonnet with a blue shirt underneath; white is avoided, because with a ray of light it would be immediately visible.

After the presentation and the explanation of the dinner, small groups of three, four or five people are formed that slowly by the waiters are brought inside the room: a small row is formed, each person placing his/her hands on the shoulders of the person who precedes with the blind waitress ahead. Guests have to go through the box of sheets, go through the first curtain, all enter the box, then the second curtain is opened and you enter the room. They accompany each other to the tables and we make them sit down one by one making sure they are calm. We then explain what they can find on the table.

Everyone begins to touch the objects they have in their place, to converse with each other. Not seeing each other in some way they seek contact and communicate by raising their voice considerably, to the point that it often happens that you have to invite them several times to lower the volume!

In some people the impact with the completely dark environment causes a real sense of panic; in these situations the waiter tries to reassure the person by making him/her talk and, if necessary, he is also taken outside to make him/her relax. If the guest calms down, after a few minutes can go back into the room in the dark. Often these people are then able to face the evening with some little support.

## **Serve dinner.**

As soon as the diners are all seated, the serving begins inside the kitchen, ready-made dishes are placed on cart which are brought into the room by the waiters, each cart is placed near a table corresponding to the number, the waiters work in pairs and have assigned certain tables, special dishes are well positioned and are delivered to the interested guest (that the blind waiter knows very well where was seated).

In the same way, the empty plates are removed and the other courses are served.

Normally dinner consists of an appetizer, first course, second course and dessert, but there can easily be variations.

## **What activities can be done during a dinner in the dark?**

First, we invite participants to try to understand how big and what shape the room is, so when they see it they can check if their feeling is correct.

Then the evening could be enjoyed with music play in the room, or with poetry's or romans reading.

A series of games / tests can also be organized: diners must recognize the various dishes and what are the ingredients that make them up. For this test it is important that the menu is not communicated before, because recognizing what is served is a fundamental test of the evening. If we want to make the activity more fun, we can give each one a sheet of paper with a pen so that in the dark the participants write down what they ate. Eventually, when the lights come on, they will be able to check what they wrote and how they wrote it!

You can also organize other small games such as recognizing various types of dried fruit, legumes or types of pasta by touch.

Letters in relief and in block capitals can be recognized and using the letter that each person has in their hand, the members of the various tables must compose a word.

Whenever possible, various fruits and vegetables can be recognized using only touch.

The sense of smell is also put to the test: it is possible to recognize coffee and various aromas contained in small cap.

Another activity that could be done concern money. The difference to the touch between the various coins is described verbally and then they are recognized by making the sum of the coins delivered to a table.

## **How does a dinner in the dark end?**

After two or three hours, people start to get tired and it is right to end the evening. it is not possible to turn on the lights because they would cause too much discomfort to the eyes that have been in the dark for a few hours. To begin to give a soft light, the waiters enter carrying candles in their hands, which are placed on the various tables; all the people who took part in the success of the evening introduce themselves: waiters, cooks and helpers; and a cart is introduced with the dishes that made up the menu.

We listen and discuss the various comments and feelings that the participants are able to express. Generally there is enthusiasm for the experience just lived and often the intention to repeat it is expressed. But there can also be considerable emotion for such intense sensations, to the point that some claim to feel much closer to what a blind person can feel.

Many kinds of questions may arise about blind life: if they are autonomous at home, how do they move around in the external environment, how do they read, write and learn, which jobs are mainly carried out, etc.

These questions are an opportunity for us to raise awareness, and allow us to make ourselves known by other citizens. ***Because, in our opinion, inclusion starts with knowledge.***

## **Contact**

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