



A Gesture of Goodwill

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Blanc's hearing impaired staff
combine gestures with gastronomy

I USUALLY BRISTLE WHEN MY requests directed at Vietnamese service staff fall on deaf ears, but for once, I don't mind. I'm at **Blanc**, the five-month old restaurant that features almost all

hearing-impaired waiters. Co-owned by Vu Anh Tu and Germ Doornbos, the proprietors of Noir, Dining in the Dark (the two restaurants share the same entrance at 178 / 180D Hai Ba Trung, D1), Blanc is equal parts food for thought and food for the palate.

Like its sister, Noir, Blanc is housed in a beautifully restored French colonial-era house from the 1930s, all high ceilings, vintage tiles (which you might recognize from the Museum of Fine Arts), and pale grey shutters. The space retains a residential feel in its partitioned rooms



includes simple signs in Vietnamese Sign Language (VSL) to encourage diners to order by signing. Most countries have their own sign language while Vietnam actually has three: Hai Phong; Hanoi which is influenced by French Sign Language; and Saigon which shares similarities with American Sign Language. The three share only 54 percent of signs in common, making them closer to distinct languages rather than variations of the same. Luckily for us, my dining companion and I both know rudimentary American Sign Language (ASL) which gives us a head start. “We want guests to experience something new without creating too much hassle,” says Tu. “In the end, we want people to have a nice night out at a restaurant which just happens to have deaf staff.”

“Some people may think it’s a burden to learn signs,” adds Germ, “but unconsciously, everyone already points at the menu without realizing it. Learning sign language is not too complicated and can be quite fun.” Diners can choose how engaged they want to be with their waiter, from pointing or using pen and paper, to signing menu items and simple phrases from a booklet on the table, to holding actual conversations with the help of a hearing staff member, if needed.



The World of VSL

We peruse the a la carte menu which is thankfully kept quite simple with only a few each of soups, starters, mains, vegetarian dishes and desserts. We settle on a Palm heart soup (VND80,000) and a

and sunken terraces as well as gorgeous collectibles gathered from Germ and Tu’s travels, ranging from thousand-year-old vases to vintage Chinese headboards. Antiques commingle with modern art and transparent Victoria Ghost chairs by Philippe Starck for an eclectic, decidedly un-stuffy Indochine vibe.

Whereas Noir is an immersive experience between the diner and the environment but not so much the staff, Blanc is fittingly its opposite. While there are earplugs available should you want to experience a totally soundless evening, Blanc is really about interacting with the wait staff, some of whom are hard of hearing and some of whom are completely deaf. The menu





while in VSL, the left hand is placed on top of the right as you wiggle the fingers of your right hand, mimicking drops of coffee from a filter. Some of the signs Hieu teaches us are self-explanatory (for example, using the right pointer finger to make a pecking motion on the back of the left hand, the sign for “chicken”) while others have us perplexed. We sign for “milk” in ASL (the fist repeatedly opening and closing, like squeezing an udder) but Hieu corrects us by cupping his hand with the thumb pointing downwards and moving it in a circular motion. Seeing our confusion, he mimes opening a can of condensed milk and turning it upside down to pour. It’s a rare dining experience where your brain gets as much of a workout as your palate and we love every second of it.

The desserts arrive, Carbonara ice cream (VND110,000), a surprisingly delicious salty-sweet concoction of ham, cheese and balsamic along with peanut butter mascarpone cream and a coffee sponge cake, and Black sesame ice cream (VND95,000), an elevated take on the common Vietnamese street food dessert, here beautifully presented with a black sesame sponge (which actually looks like a sea sponge) and pandan flan. We take the opportunity to ask Hieu a final question about what he thinks of working at Blanc. “I like making people happy and seeing them happy when they enjoy their meal,” he says. We wait for him to say something about sign language or being grateful for the employment opportunity, but he never does. Thinking he might not have understood our question, we ask one of the hearing staff to interpret. “When the guests are happy, I’m happy,” he responds again. Just to be sure, I tap out the question in Vietnamese on my iPad and he says he likes working at Blanc because ‘the restaurant is beautiful, the service is good and the food is excellent.’

I finally get it. He doesn’t feel as though his deafness is tied into his job. He’s deaf, but his deafness does not define him. He simply wants what we all want – to be good at what we do and hopefully brighten someone else’s day while doing it. If that’s not a gesture of goodwill, I don’t know what is. ■



Crab salad (VND110,000) for starters. The velvety soup is elegantly poured tableside, keeping the edges of the bowl clean and making it easier to see the slivers of palm heart and prawns tinged with curry. The kimchi makes for an unusual pairing but supplies a vibrant burst of acidity to balance out the creaminess of the soup. The Crab salad is refreshing, with lumps of sweet crab meat mixed with pomelo, cucumber and apple, contrasted by a tamarind dressing.

For mains, we go with the Norwegian Salmon (VND180,000) cooked sous-vide to seal in its moisture and presented on a bed of coconut fennel miso with a potato pave. As with Noir, the kitchen likes to play with textures and flavors and the fresh young coconut cut into tender noodles is almost unrecognizable as a savory side to go with the calamansi beurre blanc, again providing the necessary bit of brightness. The Australian black angus short rib (VND250,000) is art on a plate, the boneless beef slow-cooked for 24 hours and finished with a bacon pistachio crust over an earthy pistachio purée and red wine jus.

Between courses, we chat with Hieu, our waiter, who tells us he’s recently finished high school at the age of 26, a laudable achievement here in Vietnam. Statistics vary wildly, but one survey puts the percentage of disabled in Vietnam at 15.3 percent of the population, with the hearing impaired accounting for 13 percent of that number. In general, the attitude towards the disabled skews toward ‘care and protection,’ where family and society are primarily concerned with providing care, food and shelter while keeping the disabled away from the community at large, believing that they are inherently incapable of any meaningful social or economic participation. Ironically, the one area where the deaf are often mainstreamed is in school, where the lack of specialized deaf schools combined with the desire of parents for their children to be “normal” puts deaf children in an incredibly challenging environment where they’re expected to lip read or otherwise keep up with hearing children.

“It’s a case of low awareness, high stigma, and very little government support,” says Germ. “Those factors are very much connected. Many parents don’t want their children to sign as if there’s something wrong with it. In a way, people view the deaf from their own perspective. Because the whole world is about sight and sound, they assume the deaf and blind have a hard life. How can you work? How can you use a phone? But really, there’s so much they can do. We should be the ones to adjust to them because they will never be able to adjust to us. Their mentality is perfect, but they simply cannot express themselves through words. In the end, we don’t want guests to feel pity for our staff. We’re not a charity or an NGO. We’re simply a good restaurant that happens to have deaf staff.”

Germ goes on to explain that most of the wait staff arrive with no work experience, “but what they lack in experience, they more than make up in enthusiasm,” he says. “They can still learn; they’re not stupid. They just happen to be deaf. That doesn’t mean they can’t have a job, can’t have a life.”

The fallacy that the deaf are somehow lesser employees means they are often shunted into low profit margin industries such as handicrafts, massage and sewing. Some families simply prefer to squirrel them away, unwittingly stripping them of opportunities for mental stimulation that we all need and want. Because family members rarely learn sign language at a proficient level, communication in the home is often unsatisfyingly basic, based on a few rudimentary signs invented out of necessity.

While we wait for dessert and coffee, Hieu is our patient guide into the fascinating world of VSL. Comparing the difference in signs in ASL and VSL, we begin to see concepts through Vietnamese eyes. For instance, the sign for coffee in ASL mimes the movement of an old coffee grinder