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Math grad brings intellectual entertainment to the masses

On event night you'll find Jonathan Ezer (BMath '00), at Toronto's Jamie Kennedy Gardiner, the ultra-hip restaurant on the third floor of the Gardiner Museum, watching a room full of people seat themselves in anticipation of two hours of intellectual entertainment. At least that is what Jonathan hopes will happen if he has done a good job spreading the word about his new, inspired endeavour: Salon Voltaire.

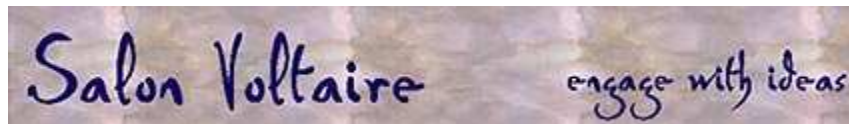


Salon Voltaire's Jonathan Ezer

Jonathan created Salon Voltaire as a biweekly lecture series, pairing academic speakers on wildly diverse topics, echoing a modern-day intellectual salon. The plan, he says, is to "facilitate an evening where sophisticated people come together to discuss art, politics and ideas that can change the world."

By partnering with Toronto's golden-boy chef, Jamie Kennedy, he draws mature audiences with a hunger for smart discussion and an appetite for fine food and cool ambiance. This differs from other lecture series because the high-end venue allows for high expectations of food and company, the lectures consistently happen every other Friday all year long, and the audience is transformed into active participants while watching a live show.

Since launching the first event this September, the speakers have talked about topics ranging from sharia law and industrial design, to the mysteries of sleep and post-communist societies, among others. Despite the disparate topics, or perhaps because of them, people have been interested.



It was UW economics professor, Larry Smith, who was the first to instill "the itch for enterprise and inspired me to think entrepreneurially," says Jonathan. Yet it was while he was working on his PhD at the London School of Economics (LSE), in England, that the concept of Salon Voltaire started bubbling to the surface of his mind.

Jonathan regularly attended public lectures hosted by LSE because there was a perceptible buzz in the hall. As a former stand-up comedian, although he admits this was a brief foray, he says, "There is a mood in a comedy club that is great, and which is surprisingly similar to the buzz in a room during a good lecture." Salon Voltaire aims to re-create this buzz and turn it into nightlife.

Jonathan is an innately optimistic and ambitious dreamer. "Pairing seemingly diverse and unrelated speakers can be made interesting in the

right hands," he says, "but it is imperative that the audience not be intimidated." Having two experts speak on Russia may alienate people who think they don't know enough about Russia to go. He continues, "If I had a one speaker on Russian and one on the impact of Harry Potter, people would be more likely to come, as they would be comfortable knowing the audience would not likely be experts on both topics."

As people tend to be shy, the trickiest part of facilitating the event is getting the first question of the night. But, he says, once it gets going, he often has to end the evening before all the questions are asked. And so far the response has been great. "We've had packed houses some evenings and we're already seeing repeat business," says Jonathan.

His big-dreamer qualities are tempered with a strong sense of business and ambition and he is working on an independent Salon Voltaire cafe and hopes to host events five nights a week. He is so confident that intellectual entertainment is an untapped and profitable market that he has plans for Salon Voltaire franchises, expanding into New York, London, Chicago, Montreal and Boston, as well as possible television programs and a furniture line.

To learn about Salon Voltaire or be part of the buzz, visit the [website](#). Jonathan can be reached by [email](#).

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