Wanted

Meet the Incredible Meat Creation That Anthony Bourdain Calls "the Pork of My Dreams"

The famous item was notoriously hard to get anywhere near, until now.

by Meesha Halm
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The Meat-Shaped Stone is one of the most deliciously tempting pork-related items known to man, but unless you're Anthony Bourdain, chances are you won't have seen it yet. The thing is so unreal, even the seen-it-all Anthony Bourdain expressed delight when he first saw it, calling it "the pork of my dreams." Starting this week, Americans will get the chance to glimpse it for the first time, and to eat the spectacular dishes American chefs are creating this summer to honor the masterpiece.
The meat shaped-stone is one of the two most famous pieces of art in the National Palace Museum in Taipei’s permanent collection; the 5.73-centimeter-tall hunk of jasper stone has been carved and dyed to resemble a sumptuous hunk of braised pork belly. It was created 200 years ago by an anonymous craftsman in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) to please a notoriously food-obsessed emperor of the Forbidden City, and it's made from banded layers of stone painted with a faux skin that uncannily captures the pork belly’s lean and fatty layers.

The stone attracts long lines daily to the National Palace Museum, and miniature replicas of it outsell any other souvenir at the gift shop. On June 17, it makes its North American debut at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, as part of an exhibition called “Emperors’ Treasures: Chinese Art From the National Palace Museum” running from June 17-Sept 18. But museumgoers won’t be the only ones getting to appreciate the pork belly and take selfies in front of a life-size replica. Thirteen renowned San Francisco chefs, including Danny Bowien (Mission Chinese Food) and Michelle Mah (The Slanted Door) have teamed up with The Asian Art Museum for Priceless Pork Belly, Plated, a month-long campaign during which restaurants will showcase a special pork belly dish inspired by the sculpture.
One participating chef, Timothy Luym of the forthcoming restaurant Buffalo Theory, even traveled to Taipei with members of the Asian Art Museum to get up close and personal with the sculpture first-hand (and admits he waited in line twice) before creating his culinary homage: a rice bowl featuring pork belly braised cooked in Red Horse beer (an American-style malt liquor brewed in the Philippines) topped with quail egg, shiitake mushroom, Chinese chives, lily flowers (pictured above). These are some of the other dishes to look out for:
At the pop-up **Ante Meridian**: chef Anthony Yang's crispy pork belly with English pea porridge, ginger oil, pea shoots, furikake.
At Dirty Habit, chef David Bazirgan's confit and fried pork belly with stone fruit caponata and Fresno chili.
At **Namu Gaji**, chef Dennis Lee’s soy-cured smoked belly with blanched napa cabbage and golden noodles.

At **Mission Chinese Food**, chef Danny Bowien’s Tiki pork belly with soy caramel, mandarin, pickled pineapple, shaved coconut and macadamia nuts.
At **Pabu**, chef Paul Piscopo's pork belly robata with lemon and sancho pepper.
At **Stones Throw**, chef Jason Halverson's warm pork belly “Banh Mi” style with pate, 5 spice aioli, spicy cucumbers and crispy sourdough.
At The Slanted Door, chef Michelle Mah's Prather Ranch caramelized pork belly with young coconut water, braised chilies and ginger.

Art lovers who can’t wait to sate their pork cravings until dinner time can stop by the Asian Art museum’s own Cafe Asia, where a classic rendition of slow-braised pork belly (cooked in wine, soy sauce, rock sugar and ginger) will be available throughout the show’s run, and pick up a miniature magnet replica of the meaty treasure at the gift shop (no ticket required).

According to Jay Xu, Asian Art Museum director and exhibition co-curator, the meat-shaped stone “exemplifies how the enduring appeal of traditional Chinese cooking has long inspired devotion.” This is only the second time the coveted stone has traveled outside Asia. An estimated 6,000 people daily (84,000 total) visited the famous sculpture when it was on loan at Japan’s Kyushu National Museum back in 2014, where it was said to have spawned a resurgence of dongpo rou, the dish that originally inspired the stone, in local restaurants.
After San Francisco, the exhibit will move to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (October 23 to January 22, 2017), but alas the precious porcine figurine won’t be a part of the traveling collection; it’s being sent back to Taiwan for another exhibition of the National Palace Museum at its new southern branch. Sorry, y’all. Photos of the meat-shaped stone are courtesy of National Palace Museum.

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