

FOOD

How to Fit All of Asia (and a Food Cart) Into a Museum Cafe?

By LIGAYA MISHAN FEB. 16, 2018

It was close to midnight, and the chef Deuki Hong was still piecing together a hot-dog cart he'd ordered online.

“This is bigger than I thought,” he told Andrew Chau and Bin Chen, the owners of Boba Guys, a bicoastal chain of bubble tea shops. In the morning, the three were scheduled to present the last part of their proposal to revamp the drowsy cafe in the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. The cart, celebrating the tradition of street food throughout Asia, would be the *pièce de résistance*, if Mr. Hong could finish it.

In recent years, museums across the country have tried to shed their reputation for drab cafeteria fare and woo visitors with destination restaurants. Mr. Hong, Mr. Chau and Mr. Chen initially looked to Untitled at the Whitney and Flora Bar, in the Met Breuer, both in New York, as models.

But the Asian Art Museum needed more than just good food. The menu had to match the museum's mission: to speak to the breadth of Asia, a region of many countries, cultures and cuisines, without reducing its complexity to a handful of clichés.

And Mr. Hong, Mr. Chau and Mr. Chen, among other candidates, weren't simply being invited to take over a cafe previously run by a corporate caterer. At stake was the future of food at a reimagined museum that is preparing to break ground on a \$90 million transformation and seeking a new connection with the people of San Francisco.

"The way to the heart is through food," said Jay Xu, who became the director of the museum in 2008, four months before the stock market crash, and shepherded it through its darkest financial hour. "Sometimes museum food is too highbrow," he said. "Our vision is to make Asian art and culture" — including cuisine — "essential to everyone."

Mr. Chau and Mr. Chen, both 35 and of Taiwanese descent, seem particularly well poised for such a challenge: In 2011, they started making bubble tea — a milk-tea drink with submerged tapioca pearls — using organic milk, house-made syrups and tea leaves instead of powders. While bubble tea had long been available in the United States and a staple of Asian-American childhoods, the Boba Guys' approach helped widen its appeal among non-Asians and earn annual revenues in the millions.

Still, when the museum first contacted them last May, "we thought we had no shot," Mr. Chau said. They weren't chefs.

Fortunately, they didn't have to look far for one — in the back room of one of their shops in San Francisco, Mr. Hong had been quietly selling Korean fried chicken under the name Sunday Bird for the past year.

Mr. Hong, 28, also has a record of revitalizing Asian classics. In 2014, he became the executive chef of an outpost of the barbecue chain Kang Ho Dong Baekjeong in Manhattan's Koreatown, a neighborhood that he and his Korean-American friends considered culinarily moribund. "They made fun of me," he said.

But the restaurant soon caught the attention of food-world luminaries like Anthony Bourdain and had to install a bouncer, with waits of up to two hours, before Mr. Hong decided to decamp for San Francisco.

For the museum, he said, he didn't want to assemble "the Top 100 hits of Asian food." His cooking is rooted in a dual heritage: The son of South Korean immigrants, he split his childhood among Texas, Alabama and New Jersey. He envisioned a menu that was nostalgic — "The best feedback to hear is 'I grew up eating this,'" he said — but not hidebound by tradition, and his partners agreed.

"I think there's a third culture," Mr. Chen said, that arises when children are raised in a culture different from their parents'. "We see it as more of a remix, rather than, 'Hey, this is authentic.' It gives you a license to create."

By August, the three men had made it through the first round of pitches to the museum. Now Mr. Hong was going to cook for Mr. Xu and his colleagues. The plan was to plate the food until the last course, when they would wheel in the cart. It couldn't be just for show — they had to be able to lift the cart's lids and reveal mantou (steamed buns) for dipping into condensed milk, matcha and caramel.

It wasn't an act of theater; it was a prototype. A key part of their proposal was introducing such carts into a setting where they might seem incongruous. Even as museums have reached out to a broader audience, the image persists of them as hushed, immaculate spaces where the paramount rule is "Do not touch." Mr. Hong, Mr. Chau and Mr. Chen were determined to change that.

On the morning of the tasting, the museum's representatives arrived and the procession of plates began, followed by the cart, somehow conjured together. The next day, the call came: The job was theirs.

"They were the only ones with a street cart," Mr. Xu said with a laugh. The first Chinese-American director of a major art museum in the United States, he grew up in Shanghai with a love for stinky tofu; Mr. Hong's dishes awoke memories, and at the same time felt new.

"They fit who we are as a museum," said Akiko Yamazaki, the museum board's chairwoman, who with her husband, Jerry Yang, a founder of Yahoo, has pledged \$25 million toward the museum's expansion.

She, too, is a third-culture kid: The daughter of Japanese parents, she was raised in Costa Rica, where her mother had to improvise Japanese dishes out of available ingredients. She likes how Mr. Hong and his partners bridge different cultures and high and low, turning elegant dishes into egalitarian snacks.

The museum cafe is set to reopen in mid-March as Sunday at the Museum, although it will be open every day but Monday. The name is a nod to Mr. Hong's Sunday Bird and the importance of taking a day off to relax, which Mr. Hong neglected in his days in high-powered kitchens.

Prices will be gentle. Higher-end tastings and tea flights will be available in a private donors' room, and Mr. Chau and Mr. Chen have been lobbying to build a secret tearoom, modeled after one at Boba Guys' headquarters that can be entered only by pushing on a bookshelf.

"It's a little kitschy, but we love it," Mr. Chau said.

And street carts will appear some time after the opening, possibly parked on the museum's front steps or in the courts on the ground floor. When the rooftop terrace above the new pavilion is completed next year, more carts will appear, alongside a tea bar and public art that might include works by Yoshitomo Nara and Ai Weiwei.

Mr. Hong is brimming with ideas for the menu, including Thai khao man gai (literally translated as chicken fat rice), Chinese cheong fun (rice noodle rolls) and Burmese laphet thoke (tea leaf salad). He's been consulting fellow chefs for recipes. Asked which dish might be the most challenging, he said: "Every dish feels like that. Even Korean food I feel like I know, but I don't really know."

His standards are high: "If it's not as delicious as this place I go to in Chinatown — " He paused, then said with a sigh, "You're never going to be as good as guys who've been doing it for generations."

Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco; 415-581-3632, asianart.org.

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