

MIAMI

WHERE TO EAT - FIRST COURSE

ALL ABOUT THE PIG AT COCHON 555

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There are few animals as controversial as the pig. Some see it as a holistic source of sustenance, others as the zenith of deliciousness, and others see it as an unhealthy, dirty, or even poisonous food. For every die-hard fan of the pig, I'm sure you can find a staunch opponent, especially when religious principles come into play. For anyone even remotely tuned into the food trends of today, it is quite obvious that the pig has exploded on the scene among chefs and home cooks, alike. Bacon is now being touted as the "candy of meats," and the once condemned lard is slowly making its way back to the place it held in American gastronomy before the word "cholesterol" made its way into the popular lexicon. Pork is popular. What used to be considered by many as a low class protein is now being served at some of the finest restaurants, and there are fewer opportunities - at least locally - to view just how much the pig's status in the kitchen has changed than at this year's [Cochon 555](#).

In its fifth year, the touring wine and dine competition made its way to **Miami** on **April 21st** and featured five local chefs utilizing five different heritage breeds of pig. The challenge was clearly to use as much of the pig as possible in the most creative ways possible, while still presenting something that is delicious. Achieving the latter is rarely a difficult task when cooking with pork, and using every part of the pig is something that has been done by a lot of people over a long period of time. Presenting something creative, however, can be a challenge. Excluding those societies where it is shunned, pork is perhaps one of the most beloved and popular meats in the world, and cultures have spent centuries perfecting recipes for every section of the pig. Want to know what do with the feet? Just look to Peruvian cuisine. How about the small intestines? Ask any Southerner about chitlins. The blood? Filipinos have just the dish!

In other words, most porcine ideas of the culinary kind have probably been done before and can only be polished or slightly modified. Among the five participating chefs who were at [The Four Seasons](#) in Brickell for the Cochon event, many stuck to variations of classics or did away with any pretense at creativity and produced flawless renditions of timeless pork dishes from around the world. The host hotel's own **Chef Aaron Brooks** of [Edge](#) served porchetta, homemade kielbasa, and a smoked pork rib chili that were excellently prepared. **Chef Timon Balloo** of the very popular [Sugarcane](#) in Midtown went the Asian route with a dim sum classic of sticky rice wrapped in lotus leaf studded with char sui and homemade Chinese sausage. **Chef David Thomas** of **José Andrés's** [The Bazaar](#) served an on-point homemade mortadella with pickled lard, as well as a northern Spanish style fabada with homemade butifarra sausage.

Some of the chefs took inspiration from traditional dishes and made them into something completely unique, sometimes infusing pork where it's never traditionally been. Chef Aaron Brooks, in a nod to Miami's Cuban culture, made a head cheese-stuff pastelito, while Chef Balloo presented pig blood wrapped soup dumplings that were apparently so good that they ran out by the middle of the competition. **Chef Jeff McInnis** of **Yardbird Southern Table & Bar** took to reinventing some of the more low-brow guilty pleasures of American cuisine, such as the Handy Snacks of our youth, with homemade Slim Jim, bacon grissini, and a pimento cheese/deviled ham dip. His corn dogs offered a pleasant surprise I hope to experience again sometime soon: the fluffy cornmeal batter revealed not a hotdog but tender head cheese and unctuous guanciale.

Perhaps some of the most creative interpretations of American dishes came from **Chef Cesar Zapata** of [The Federal](#), a restaurant that I had previously written off for food that seemed uninspired despite being modestly tasty. If the offerings at Cochon 555 are any indication of what is happening in the kitchen at The Federal, then the restaurant deserves a closer look. The simple but well-executed dishes represented a panoramic view of American gastronomy from a biscuit with pig's blood gravy to a velvety corn chowder with pork skin and crispy fried corn silk. The most creative offering, however, was a take on a Chicago hot dog consisting of a pâte à choux pastry encasing a mortadella mousse and topped with the "dragged through the garden" toppings found in a typical Chi-Town dog.

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While chefs like David Thomas demonstrated some gimmicky innovation with such things as liquid nitrogen chicharrones that gave one “hog’s breath” and bourbon-bacon cotton candy, the most creative items seemed to be in the form of a dessert. Some chefs played it safe with bacon brownies or bacon chocolate ice cream bars, while other chefs decided to take risks. Pig’s blood featured in two ice cream preparations. Chef McInnis of Swine did a rocky road with lard marshmallows that was too sweet for my liking and was served in a pork cracklin’ cone that was probably delicious when just made but was quite stale by the time it reached me. Chef Balloo’s dessert was truly inspired and perhaps my favorite dish of the event. Large tapioca pearls floated in a coconut lard jelly with pieces of mango and a scoop of szechuan peppercorn-flavored pig’s blood ice cream. In both desserts, the blood didn’t seem to be quite as pronounced as one would expect from eating morcilla or blood cakes.

In addition to the pork, there was a pig butchery demonstration, as well artisanal American cheeses, which were incredible and deliciously convincing enough to make any connoisseur let go of his French imports. As any good food event would have it, there was also a good selection of wines and liqueurs, particularly whisky in its many avatars. What was a bit unexpected, however, was the presence of hard cider, which has unjustly become something of the forgotten spirit. Far from the Sedano’s Sidra enjoyed at Cuban New Year’s Eve parties, [Crispin](#) offers several varieties of American hard cider that are as complex as some of the best craft beers but without the heaviness. It’s like a beautiful cross of champagne and beer with serious apple notes that remind one of calvados. The crispness of the brew is a perfect counterbalance to the richness of pork.

Guests were able to vote for their favorite chef at Cochon 555, and in a proud moment for The Four Seasons, Chef Aaron Brooks took home the prize. While his dishes strayed little from the tried and true, his execution was flawless, and that just goes to show that when the public is concerned it and when the subject is pork, there is little need to stray from years of culinary tradition.

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