



Publication: The Straits Times Life!
Date: Jun 14 2007
Headline: Dig in to this hard rock buffet

Dig in to this hard rock buffet

Get stoned at the National Museum's quirky exhibition of more than 50 'delicacies' hewn by nature and almost good enough to eat

Adeline Chia
ARTS REPORTER

DON'T bite into these tempting pig's trotters or you're likely to break your teeth. This "dish" isn't the real thing, but is made up of rare stones and minerals shaped by nature to look like food items.

It is one of 52 "delicacies" going on show for a month at A Banquet In Stone, a quirky exhibition at the National Museum starting next Tuesday.

Valued at \$1 million, the exhibits are on loan from Taiwanese stone collector Hsu Chun-I, a retired engineer who has been collecting these stones for the past 20 years.

The stoney banquet will be a spread of delicacies from East and West. On the menu are Asian dishes such as shark's fin soup, dim sum, Yangzhou fried rice and bak kut teh, and Western fare such as foie gras and caviar.

The pig's trotters and eggs in dark soy sauce dish is the most valuable at \$130,000, and is made up of rare Gobi stones from Inner Mongolia.

None of the stones were dyed, shaped, smoothened or tampered with in any way. Instead, Mr Hsu, 60, cracks his head to assemble and combine the various stones in his collection into complete dishes.

He says that he has always been a stone collector, but the food focus only started 11 years ago when he came across an exhibition in Taipei.

Two food-shaped exhibits, a piece of jade that resembles bok choy and a dark brown rock that looks like a piece of stewed meat, inspired him to collect similar stones.

Sourcing mostly from merchants in Taiwan, China, Indonesia and Myanmar, he has amassed a buffet of 276 dishes valued at over \$2 million.

For reference, he cuts out magazine and newspaper pictures of various foods, and looks for stones that can pass off as the ingredients.

For example, a grey triangular piece of hemimorphite, a mineral stone from Mexico, looks like shark's fin while smooth white pebbles from Inner Mongolia resemble glutinous rice balls.

Mr Hsu, who is very selective of the stones he buys, says:

"It's about quality, not quantity. For every dish, I use stones that bear more than 80 per cent resemblance to the real thing."

His collection has been exhibited in the National Museum of History and the Kaohsiung Museum in Taiwan, and both exhibitions were hits with the public.

The father of two grown-up children said: "My wife and children used to say, 'Why do you waste so much money and time on your stones? It's going to be a nightmare if we move.'"

"Now that I have made some small achievements, they have stopped scolding me."

Besides visiting stone merchants, he spends his time dusting his display cabinets, in a room he describes as a "mini-museum".

He rubs baby oil onto the stones to protect them and to keep them shiny, and constantly re-arranges them in different combinations to see if they can look like more realistic dishes.

One day, he hopes to start a real museum for his collection: "I've kept these stones for a long time without showing them, but I'd like to share them with people now."

"They are creations of nature and have taken thousands of years to form - they're just priceless."

> chiahta@sph.com.sg

> A Banquet In Stone is on at the National Museum from next Tuesday to Aug 12. The opening hours are 10am to 9pm daily. Admission is free.



BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLATE: Worth \$1 million, the exhibits include (clockwise from above) pig's trotters and eggs in dark soy sauce - the most expensive exhibit; Yangzhou fried rice; and 'Dragon and Phoenix' steamboat. The 'dishes' comprise rare Gobi stones, ammonite minerals and fossils from Inner Mongolia.



PHOTOS: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE