

The English House

Singapore

Words: Heleri Rande • Photography: Courtesy of The English House

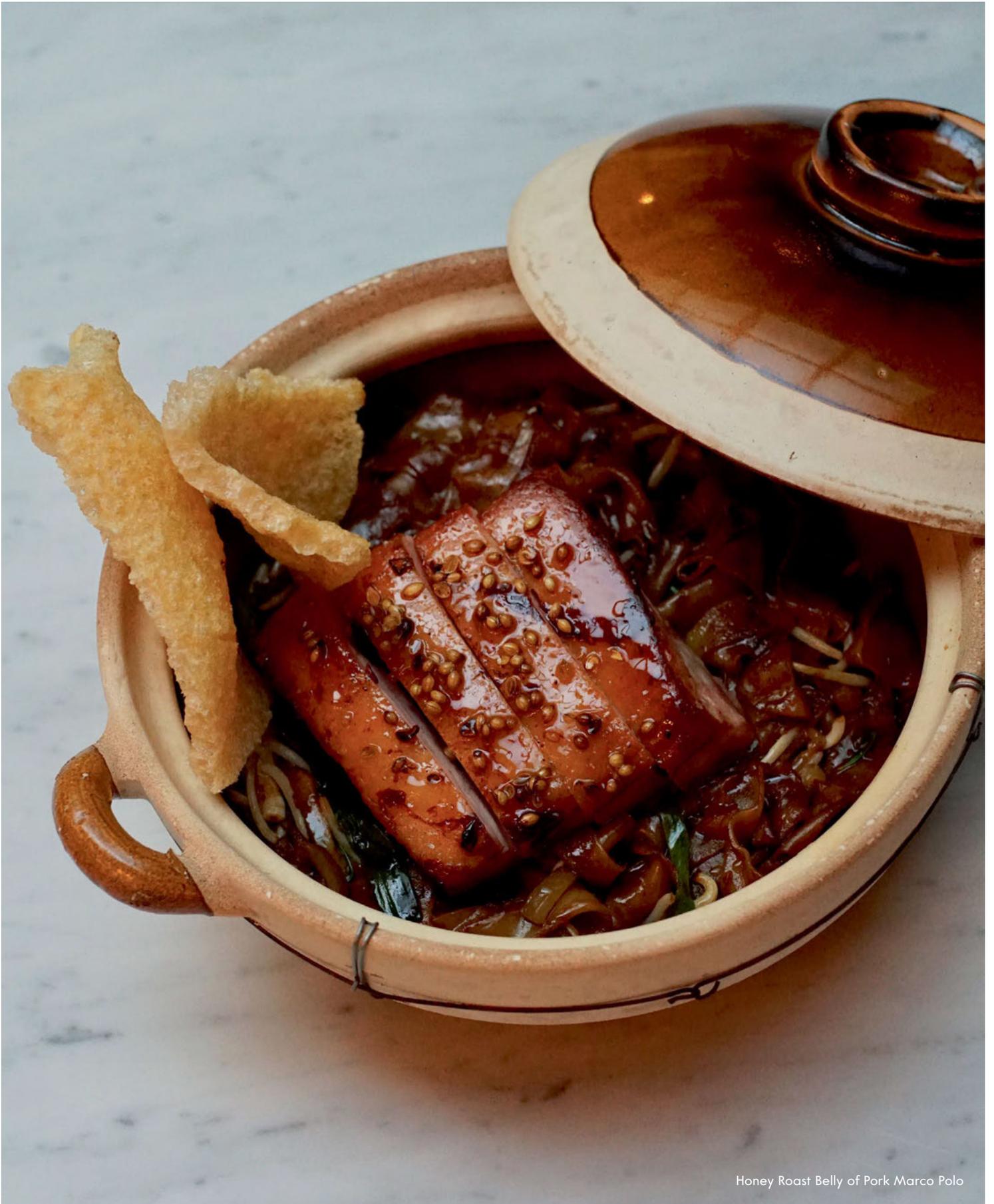
The first Asian outpost of acclaimed chef Marco Pierre White is tucked away behind tropical foliage in Singapore's Robertson Quay neighbourhood. Two adjoining 19th-century colonial shophouses have been meticulously restored to create a 150-cover restaurant, and a private dining room with capacity for up to 14 guests; 18 rooms will also open here during the course of 2019, echoing the model that White employs at sister hotel Rudloe Arms in Wiltshire. Getting The English House to its current refined state has been no easy quest. It took White and his team over three years to painstakingly restore the space, which had to be almost entirely gutted, albeit with a keen focus throughout on paying homage to the past. "You have to accept that we are in Singapore," he says. "You have to respect what Singapore represents. This is an old shophouse and therefore, firstly, it is about restoring the shophouse back to what it was and, secondly, it is about bringing a piece of England to Singapore."

Walking up the stairs from the main street, having brushed away those bushes hiding the property from view, a sense of excitement builds palpably. This feeling continues inside, where works of art drawn from White's personal collection add an element of whimsy to the dining experience. "The eye must always be amused," White continues. "We have lots of eccentricities here, and eccentricities will amuse the mind. Let's not forget that although we live in a grown-up world, at the end of

the day we all want to be children." This Peter Pan-ish essence is further evident in the disdain with which he views the majority of contemporary restaurants. "Dinner is quite boring because in most restaurants, the environment is boring," he argues. "You need to create an environment that captures the imagination; you want the guest to be fascinated and get lost. All I really do is create a toy shop that sells food."

There is certainly plenty to amuse and delight at The English House, from remarkable antiquities and an impressive collection of autographed Terry O'Neill photographs to bright yellow lavatory signs from the London Underground, which date back to 1964. Taken together, all of these eye-catching features help to create a strong and coherent narrative for the restaurant, something that is obviously very important for White. "How does a space affect you when you arrive?" he asks. "I accept that life is very stressful, therefore you finish work and want something to happen. So, let's take ourselves into the playground, let's get lost and involved. It is all about the emotional impact for me."

The food at The English House is, as the name suggests, a nod to the best of British with a few extra touches here and there. Overseen by chef Andrew Bennett, who has worked with White since he was 17, the menu showcases classics such as Mr White's stuffed cabbage with fresh tomato sauce, Mr Lamb's shepherd's pie with buttered garden peas, and a hearty English egg custard. But despite famously becoming the



Honey Roast Belly of Pork Marco Polo



Spectacular feature decorations inside The English House

youngest British chef to win three Michelin stars back in 1995 (at the age of just 33), White is not one to talk incessantly about food. On the contrary, he finds the topic boring. “Without food we don’t live, so food is really important, but it is not a conversation,” he says. “All you have to know about food is that mother nature is the true artist and we are just cooks.” But he does admit that becoming a chef was probably the best course of action for a character like his. “Gastronomy is the greatest form of therapy any misfit could be exposed to,” he reflects. “And I was that perfect misfit.”

The importance of service in the overall guest experience is something that White keeps stressing over and over. When coming for dinner, the customer is greeted by two doormen – brothers Sarjit Singh and Swaran Singh – who have switched to Mohamed Sultan Road after 26 years at Raffles Singapore. The waiting staff also change their uniforms between lunch and dinner, a small yet crucial detail that transforms the tone of the space. As for the patron himself, White is happy to do rounds on the floor, greeting guests and welcoming them to his home away from home. “I am an old-fashioned restaurateur,” he explains. “I sit with my clients and I eat with my clients. But I watch the room, I watch everything.”

A true romantic at heart, he admits that The English House is an extension of himself, encompassing both the successes and the failings. “This place is like a child, and children never turn out the way you

want,” he muses. “I am never happy. This means that it is never good enough and has always got to improve. I believe we live in a world of refinement, not invention.”

To this day, White obviously draws a lot of inspiration from his upbringing. “My mother brought me into this world to make things, not to make money,” he recalls. “She was so aware of the underprivileged.” This perhaps explains why the restaurant welcomes everyone as equals, and lets customers decide the level of formality. White is also influenced by what he sees when travelling, which he considers to be a necessity for personal growth. “Travel removes the blinkers,” he says. “When I travel, I remove everything from where I came from. I want to sit with the people, I want to see what they see. If I go to Singapore, I want to sit with Singaporean people.”

Under White’s careful eye, there can be no doubt that the 18 rooms currently under development here will carry on the very particular and intimate feel of the restaurant below. In an interesting move, each guestroom will be allocated a designated table at the property’s private terrace. It’s a nice touch and one that, from the guest’s point of view, will undoubtedly enhance the memorable environment that White has worked so hard to achieve. ●

www.theenglishhouse.com

IN A BITE Covers: 150 (restaurant), 14 (private dining) • Owner: Marco Pierre White • Operator: Christophe Capron and Leticia Pierre White • Interior Design: Marco Pierre White • Head Chef: Andrew Bennett • Beverage Manager: Andrea Pregarz • Dinnerware: Wedgwood, RAK • Cutlery: Heritage Collection