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Don't Make Me Do It

A tango with the mystery taco

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I'm not a particularly adventurous eater. I never have been. I'm the kind of guy who can stuck in a food spiral — grab that one meal that's particularly satisfying, then eat it basically every night until you get sick of the sight of it. I don't know, there's a comfort in it, in familiarity, predictability.

This weekend, I was invited to a game night with some friends by Manny and Abi Augello. Manny's a sous chef at Jolie's and Abi is a local event planner. This was the first time I'd been over for a game night at their house, and as Abi put it, "It's really just an excuse to make Manny cook for our friends."

What was on the food agenda? (Because it's usually an important question for me. If the meal's outrageous, I either have to come up with a reason not to go — "Sorry guys, surprise colonoscopy! Maybe next week." — or I have to prepare myself to stealthily arrange a plate of food that doesn't make me look like Mr. Blandpalate.)

They were going to have a taco bar. Awesome.

Nothing too perilous on a taco bar, right? Individually, the components of a taco are innocuous. Together, tasty but not necessarily adventurous.

I'm in.

We arrived, and the food was already set out for us to enjoy. Manny walked us over and detailed all the delicious stuff we'd have to choose from.

The first meat option? Pork belly.

He told me how it was prepared, but I have no idea what he said. I was still spinning on the pork belly.

More refined and adventurous palates, scoff if you must at my jejune reaction. But for a guy who considers a hamburger with Swiss instead of cheddar "stepping out of the box," pork belly is a little intimidating.

(It wasn't until the next day, while recounting the evening with a friend of mine that I learned, "You're an idiot. Most bacon made in the U.S. comes from pork belly. You eat that all the time." Touché.)

Did I eat a pork belly taco? Yes, I did. And it was really delicious. So was the rest of his taco bar: backstrap, garlic shrimp, this poblano-pepper-and-onion

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thing that won several raves from people, and a host of other goodies.

And while the pork belly taco may not have been a giant leap forward for my pathetically unrefined palate — my palate is still singing bluegrass on the porch of a log cabin in the Appalachians — it was a tiny step forward in food bravery.

Or at least that's what I tell myself.

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