

**REGIONAL QUALIFIER FOR THE CANADIAN  
CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP**

Providing young Canadians the opportunity to be extraordinary through sport, music and food.



## 2023 Canadian Culinary Championship

Culinary Report by James Chatto, National Culinary Advisor

To the nation's capital on a cold and frosty first of February to begin the Canadian Culinary Championship – this country's most significant chefs' competition and the culmination of the Canada's Great Kitchen Party 2022-2023 campaign. This is the fifteenth time we have held the CCC – and past champions have emerged from Winnipeg, Whistler, Edmonton, twice from Vancouver, twice from Montreal, twice from Toronto, twice from Calgary and three times from Ottawa-Gatineau. This year's competitors all won their regional competitions last fall. They are, from East to West: our St. John's champion – David Vatcher of Best Coast Restaurant, in Corner Brook, NL; our Montreal champion – Imad-Eddine Makraji of Bab Kech; our Ottawa-Gatineau champion – Briana Kim of Alice; our Toronto champion – Sebastian Perez of Isabelle, in Burlington's Pearl Hiotel & Spa; our Winnipeg champion – Edward Lam of Yujiro Japanese Restaurant; our Saskatoon champion – Steve Squier of Picaro and Cohen's Beer Republic; our Edmonton champion – Serge Belair of the Edmonton Convention Centre; our Calgary champion – Scott Redekopp of Yellow Door Bistro in Calgary's Hotel Arts; and our Vancouver champion – Bobby Milheron of Homer St. Cafe & Bar, Tableau Bar Bistro and Maxine's Cafe & Bar.

A strong group indeed! And having tasted all their food in the regional events, I can honestly say that any of them could end up on the podium. Who will decide the winner? Canada's Great Kitchen Party has more than 75 judges across the country – a regiment of chefs, writers, critics and chef-instructors who together form an extraordinary academy of expertise! And in each city we have a Senior Judge – men and women with the best palates in the country. Only they have the courage and moral authority to pass judgement on our chefs. I write their names with pride...

Senior Judge St. John's is Roary Macpherson, Chef, father and promoter of all things Newfoundland. Senior Judge, Montreal, Gildas Meneu has been a food and gastronomy journalist for almost 25 years. Senior Judge, Ottawa-Gatineau, Anne DesBrisay is an Ottawa-based food writer and editor. Senior Judge, Toronto, Sasha Chapman is an award-winning writer and editor. Senior Judge, Winnipeg, Barbara O'Hara is a chef, pastry chef, chef educator and culinary judge. Senior Judge, Saskatoon, Noelle Chorney is a food writer and editor, leader of Slow Food Saskatoon. Senior Judge, Edmonton, Mary Bailey is a food, wine and travel writer. Senior Judge, Calgary, John Gilchrist is an author, critic and broadcaster. Senior Judge, Vancouver, Joie Alvaro Kent is an author, culinary judge and entrepreneur. Our Judge Invigilator this year, Chris Johns, is an author and food and travel writer who flew over from Spain to be part of the fun.

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All of the above-mentioned took their introductory bows on Thursday night in a splendid ceremony held in the elegant, Wedgewood-inspired surroundings of the Fairmont Chateau Laurier's Adam Room, applauded by an invited audience of media, sponsors and friends of the Kitchen Party. Past stars of our Ottawa Kitchen Parties provided marvellous food, including Yannick La Salle (2019 culinary champion and now Executive Chef of the Supreme Court of Canada), 2019 gold medallist Ian Carswell of Black Tartan Kitchen, Joe Thottungal of Coconut Lagoon (2016 gold medallist and 2017 CCC silver medallist), Daniela Manrique from Soca (2018 and 2019 medallist) and the Fairmont's own chef, David de Bernardi. The evening ended with each competing chef being handed a bottle of mystery wine, unlabelled and with an anonymous cork, chosen by KP's own National Wine Advisor, David Lawrason. This year, just to set the cat among the pigeons, there were two mystery wines – one red and one white – and chefs received one or the other entirely at random. They had all night to ponder and taste the wine before being sent out shopping in Ottawa, charged with creating a dish that was a perfect match for their wine. The catch? They had to make the dish for 300 people and spend only \$600 on ingredients. The results would be tasted and judged on Friday night – the weekend's first competition.

Meanwhile, even as we partied, a fiendish polar vortex hit the Ottawa area with temperatures plummeting. By the time the chefs started shopping on Friday morning, it was minus 41°C in the nation's capital, but they stepped boldly forth... Briana Kim even went foraging for pine needles! By the afternoon they were all busy cooking and the Judge Invigilator and I checked their receipts to make sure no one had overspent. All good.

Here are the dishes they made, starting with the four chefs who ended up with the white wine, later revealed to be a rich, weighty and complex 2020 Chardonnay from Le Clos Jordanne in Jordan Village, Niagara.

Sebastian Perez (Toronto) braised leeks in white wine with butter and thyme until they were beguilingly soft then cut them into rounds. Beside them he set a mound of sliced and roasted mushrooms (king oyster, cremini and shiitake) moistened with beef stock. Matching the wine's texture was a delicious sauce of heavy cream and vegetable stock spiked with a touch of gorgonzola – and here was a crunchy slaw of fennel and apple (echoing notes in the wine) tossed with a little red onion and a carefully judged citrus vinaigrette that did not overwhelm the wine with its acidity. A drizzle of blueberry gastrique brought a little more acid to the party. The dish was finished with two sturdy but crisp crackers flavoured with powdered porcini.

Briana Kim (Ottawa), whose restaurant is vegan, chose yuba as her protein, folding and compressing 16 layers of the tofu skin to imitate a schnitzel, breaded with panko, black pepper and sesame and then fried. Two small squares of this were layered between leeks that had been confited in charcoal oil, and a little kombu jam, the kelp cooked down with charred onions, miso paste, fermented black bean paste, honey and apple cider vinegar. On top of these stacked elements was a little cap of exquisitely patterned membraneous basil “lace” like a square swatch of silk, flavoured with foraged pine needles. Chef Kim finished the dish with a rich miso and yeast bisque scented with coriander, star anise, fennel and cumin. The fennel and leek certainly found similar flavours in the wine but it was the textural affinity between the dish and the Chardonnay that really pleased the judges.

Steve Squier (Saskatoon) approached the wine in a different but also very effective way. He made perfect agnolotti – one for each plate – filled with a tasty farce of green pea and scallop. Beside that lay a thick slice of slow-cooked pork belly that he had braised with fennel and garlic then crisped in a frying pan. A charred red pepper purée worked like a romesco sauce – a great condiment for the pork, as were the dots of balsamic-spiked black olive tapenade and tangy little fried capers. The bright fennel notes in the wine were echoed by a small rhomb of fennel root braised with saffron and garlic oil and there was more fennel in a honeyed emulsion that bridged some of the other elements on the plate. The dish was finished with pea tendrils and micro radish.

Scott Redekopp (Calgary) was the last chef to pair with the white wine. His dainty dish centred around a loin of Pacific cod, delightfully tender and cooked just to the point where its juices were seized. Nestled inside the fish was a delicate curried shrimp mousseline, then the whole fillet was wrapped in zucchini ribbons. Each guest received a slice of this, laid upon a purée of smoked corn enriched with saffron. Tangy little cherry tomatoes also came to play, together with Thai basil leaves and rings of shaved celery. The crowning glory was a crumble of crushed chicken skin and panko fried in chicken schmaltz.

At this point, we moved on to dishes matched to the mystery red – which turned out to be the sibling of the Chardonnay, Le Clos Jordanne’s 2020 Pinot Noir, a beauty that proved surprisingly vulnerable to acidity on the plate.

Edward Lam (Winnipeg) was the first chef to present a dish. He used part of his meagre budget to score a case of frog’s legs which he deboned then marinated in rice wine before deep frying them and tossing them in a rich sauce of rice lees miso, oyster sauce, garlic and 13-spice powder. He made ribbons of rutabaga and cooked them with Chinese vinegar and Szechuan pepper oil. Another component was a rich purée of spinach, goat cheese and caramelized onion. Chef then poured on a savoury broth made from beef stock enhanced with the bones from the frog’s legs and flavoured with star anise, cumin, roast onion and garlic, and with shiitake mushrooms that

dramatically boosted the umami level. One or two juicy poached goji berries added bright red colour and savoury tang.

David Vatcher (St. John's) made arancini, starting with moist mushroom risotto using button, cremini, chanterelles and morels. Each golden sphere was properly moist and rich inside its crisp crust. Sharing the plate was a ring of silky butternut squash purée and two spoonfuls of bacon and caramelized onion jam that hid soft, juicy whole bing cherries (a great avenue into the wine). A drizzle of herb oil and some refreshingly tart red currants finished the plate.

Serge Belair (Edmonton) made paté en croute for the entire crowd of 300 – a process that usually takes three days but that he achieved in a matter of hours. Slicing each perfectly browned dome of pastry revealed a mosaic of bacon-enriched pork shoulder, some of the pieces limned with leek ash, studded with dried cherries and seasoned with cinnamon. A stripe of pickled beet purée was crowned with a salad of kale, fennel, radish and parsley drizzled with a subtle white wine vinaigrette, and a scattering of pickled carrot and onion. A wee quenelle of Dijon and mustard seed was the paté's companion.

Imad-Eddine Makraji (Montreal) braised beef “tagine-style” with onions and cranberries then forked it into shreds and set it beneath an ethereal wafer of crisp, almond-covered pastry, like a deconstructed pastilla. He made a mash of butternut squash flavoured with cinnamon, orange flower water and fennel seeds and set a spoonful on every plate, sprinkling it with sesame seeds. Beside this was a spoonful of whole green peas in a stiff matrix of stewed button and shiitake mushrooms, sharpened with confited lemon. Beside both stood a sturdy puck of red beet glazed with orange.

Bobby Milheron (Vancouver) was the last chef to present his dish to the judges. He wrapped a juicy pork loin in a coarse, rustic pork paté then laid a pretty slice of it onto every plate. Beside it was a crisp, tissue-thin toasted rye cracker that hid the dish's other elements. Here was Savoy cabbage, charred and roasted but still toothsome tender, topped with raw kohlrabi. There was a spoonful of deeply flavourful, stiff-textured purée of roasted Ambrosia and Granny Smith apples. A small pool of pale green buttermilk dressing had been sharpened with juiced kohlrabi and apple then split with herb oil.

The judges mulled over the marks they awarded but did not reveal them to the chefs or the audience. At this stage, three chefs had pulled away from the pack, led by Briana Kim. We were then informed that her station had run out of food fifteen minutes before the end of service, which meant we had to penalize her by taking away five percent of her marks. It was a consolation to her, perhaps, to receive the People's Choice award for her dish.

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As always, the second competition in this gruelling culinary triathlon is the Black Box challenge, in which chefs have an hour to create two dishes using seven mystery ingredients. We had an intriguing inventory for them this year – two whole walleye (aka pickerel), silken tofu from La Soyarie in Gatineau, a bundle of hay, black walnuts from Grimo Nut Nursery in Niagara, a bunch of chiondia beets with their greens, some forced rhubarb and 12 duck eggs. Our venue was Algonquin College but we were only one hour into the event when a power outage occurred. To everyone's profound regret, the Black Box had to be cancelled and the unfulfilled, adrenalin-charged posse of chefs returned to the Shaw Centre to prepare their dishes for the evening's Grand Finale.

Once again, the judges were sequestered, like 11 Wizards of Oz, behind a curtain in a distant corner of the Shaw Centre's Trillium ballroom, but this time the chefs were allowed to accompany their dishes into our lair and explain what they had created. Our judging criteria included marks for presentation, texture, technical achievement, wine compatibility (each chef chose the accompanying wine for their dish), wow factor, and above all taste.

Bobby Milheron (Vancouver) presented first, bringing us the essence of the Pacific ocean in a bowl. Cured geoduck clam was lightly smoked, poached and then very briefly seared to a remarkable tenderness. Echoing its sublime marine flavour was a dainty slice of spot prawn held in a matrix of shellfish mousseline, wrapped in bull kelp. Beneath the geoduck lay a finger of grated sunchoke cake, creamy inside, crispy on the surface. A leaf of lightly pickled bull kelp provided acidity and another taste of the sea, while sunchoke skin crisps gave us scrumptious crunch. Chef's sauce was a shellfish reduction made from spot prawn, geoduck and bull kelp oil, as rich as butter. Two intensely flavourful oyster leaves offered another marine nuance. Mission Hill 2021 Reserve Rosé from the Okanagan was the wine match.

Steve Squier (Saskatoon) was up next. He had prepared a torchon of foie gras cured with miso, spruce and whiskey and wrapped it with tender duck breast cured with ash and mushroom and a hint of white truffle shoyu. Beside a slice of this gorgeous roulade lay half a juicy morel stuffed with a smooth duck-meat farce. Fermented faro and crunchy puffed wild rice gave the dish a base of pleasantly chewy grain; roasted celeriac purée was as smooth as silk. A spoonful of redcurrant jell brought tangy acidity and garnishes included a moment of caribou moss seasoned with nori dust, a scattering of shiso sprouts and a dainty tuile that looked like the skeleton of an autumn leaf, made from crisped duck skin. Chef poured on a perfectly judged demiglace, leavened and brightened by dashi. His wine was Benjamin Bridge's Pétillant Naturel from Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

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Briana Kim (Ottawa) now brought us a plant-based adventure for the palate that had grown judges sighing with pleasure. The experience of this dish began with a glass cloche filled with a whisp of kombu smoke, lifted away to release the scents of a campfire on an ocean beach and to reveal a timbale of layered ingredients. The crown was a delicate tuile flavoured with “funk dust,” a fine powder of fermented and dehydrated seaweed, onion and mushrooms. Beneath it was a layer of dime-sized potato slices that had been confited in black garlic oil, creamy tofu and fennel pollen, each one dotted with a citrus gel. Below that lay strands of honey-preserved rhubarb jerky and smoked maitake mushrooms over a porridge of charred corn and toasted barley. Chef poured on a rich broth made from green tomatoes fermented in brine for two years, blended with koji butter and smoked kelp broth. Her wine was Pearl Morissette’s 2019 Irreverence, a blend of Riesling and Gewürztraminer with a hint of Chardonnay from Ontario’s Niagara Peninsula.

David Vatcher (St. John’s) gave us a trio of beautifully executed elements. Here was a perfectly seared scallop on a spoonful of buttery truffled hollandaise sauce. Nestled up against it was a small cube of tender roasted pork belly glazed with a sweet-sour moment of hoisin, sesame and soy; a little partridgeberry compote was spooned on top. A piece of halibut, cooked sous-vide, came topped with a green chimichurri, while a curry aioli was swirled around the plate. The finishing touches were a hank of crispy parsnip shavings and a teaspoonful of beads of bakeapple “caviar.” Chef’s wine match was the off-dry 2021 Riesling from Benjamin Bridge in Nova Scotia’s Gaspereau Valley.

Edward Lam (Winnipeg) delighted the judges with his whimsical plating. A ground lamb tsukune with the texture of meatloaf, glazed with a lamb tare demi-glace like a teriyaki sauce, was playfully presented on a slender stick to be eaten like a lollipop. A small pool of anchovy-flavoured yogurt and a streak of mint oil were meant for dipping – a most delectable idea. The second component of the dish looked like a candy wrapped in a twist of crisp phyllo pastry. Inside it was a cube of shredded lamb flack that Chef had roasted with cumin and 13 spices then forked apart. A pungent blue-cheese-and-honey sauce adorned this tasty bonbon. At the centre of the plate, a spoonful of egg yolk sauce was enisled by more of the lamb tare jus. The wine pairing was the 2020 Nate’s Syrah from Nichol in Naramata, British Columbia.

Imad-Eddine Makraji (Montreal) cooked us a boneless beef chuck rib, braised until fork-tender but still moist and juicy, and topped it with a confit of figs and prunes and a sprinkle of crushed roasted almonds. Beside it lay an individual pastilla – a round phyllo pastry pillow filled with a spicy-sweet mixture of tomato and onion, orange and cinnamon, dusted with its traditional “snow” of icing sugar. Potato appeared as a saffron-scented brunoise and as an exquisite anise-scented tuile. Two dots of mashed sweet potato scented with cinnamon continued the sweet-spicy interplay and the dish was completed by a sauce reduced from the beef braising juices and infused

with a raz al hanoute blend of 24 spices. Chef's wine was the Haywire 2019 Gamay from B.C.'s Okanagan Valley.

Scott Redekopp (Calgary) presented a treatise on superb Alberta rabbit. He created a roulade of the juicy loin cinched up beside a mousseline made from the leg meat and a touch of rilette, all wrapped in his house-cured prosciutto. Two of the rabbit's tiny ribs were frenched and studded with a purée of mushroom and brown butter – breaded and fried, they were gone in a trice. A bean-sized croquette contained a creamy mix of rabbit meat and mushroom purée; beside it lay a perfect sunchoke-and-potato pavé moistened with a smoked cream flavoured with white truffle and topped with crispy sunchoke dimes. A swoop of carrot and hazelnut purée brought an earthy tang to the dish, while pickled Saskatoon berries in a reduction of Japanese plum wine added tangy acidity. Micro greens and a slice of raw fennel refreshed a rich jus made from the rabbit bones. Dirty Laundry 2020 Hush Red from the Okanagan was the wine pairing.

Sebastian Perez (Toronto) approached this leg of the competition from an elegantly classical perspective. Saddle of red deer dusted with rosemary, thyme, crushed chili and lemon zest was the principal protein, cooked medium rare and seasoned with a sprinkling of coffee-and-yuzu-flavoured Maldon salt. Two thick slices of the venison sat on a silky, butter-rich purée of confited apple and celeriac. The sauce was a meaty reduction spiked with pomegranate seeds that brought their own bitter-sweet crunch to the proceedings. Juicy chunks of sautéed maitaki and king oyster mushrooms found the textural sweet spot between tender and firm. The coup de grace was a translucent fin made by turning apple and celeriac juice into glass as thin as cellophane.

Serge Belair (Edmonton) was the last chef to bring us his dish. How brave to present a dessert! At its heart were the small pears from the tree in Chef's garden, prepared in many ways and in delectable harmonies with almond and chocolate. A few grains of Maldon salt sparked a simple poached pear; a tiny perfect macaron tasted intensely of pear and lemon. A classic white wine sabayon served as sauce for a golfball-sized, warm chocolate and almond cake with a sinfully gooey heart, while an elegant little almond sablé biscuit was crowned with a spoonful of ice cream flavoured with roasted pear and gorgonzola. A dot of sweet pear gel and two tangy sorrel leaves rounded off this flawless little medley. Chef's wine was the 2019 Select Late Harvest Vidal from Henry of Pelham in Niagara.

The judges sat back at last and deliberated over their numbers as the celebration party began in another part of the building. When all was said and done, Serge Belair of Edmonton won the bronze medal. Bobby Milheron of Vancouver took the silver. The gold, by a unanimous decision and a considerable margin, was awarded to Briana Kim of Ottawa – the new Canadian Culinary Champion! Alongside the glory of the victory she wins our prize, provided by Air Canada, official airline of the Canadian Culinary Championship: two business-class tickets to anywhere in the world Air Canada flies.