

**REGIONAL QUALIFIER FOR THE CANADIAN
CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP**

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



We're back! Canada's Great Kitchen Party hit the ground running last night with the first event of our 2022 campaign – Ottawa-Gatineau. After a three-year hiatus (filled with some pretty fabulous, not to say creative, fundraising virtualities) the Kitchen Party is happening again, with all its trademark verve and energy and passion.

The venue was the stately old house that is home to Le Cordon Bleu cooking school and everyone present was fully aware that this was something of a teaser for the Canadian Culinary Championship which takes place here in the Nation's Capital over three days next February. Last night was a brilliant way to identify a local champion to take on the rest of the country at the CCC.

It was an enormous treat to sit down in judgement again, tucking in my napkin and welcoming a succession of dazzlingly intelligent, delicious and visually exquisite dishes. Together they were absolute proof of something we all know well: that the food scene in Ottawa-Gatineau is exceptionally strong these days – not to mention uniquely collegial and close-knit. Which of course presents a real problem: we only have one gold medal to give away.

How on earth was a winner found? Thank goodness we had a dazzling jury of judges, led by our Senior Judge for Ottawa-Gatineau – Anne DesBrisay – author, restaurant critic, and vastly experienced palate who has been a star of our organisation since the first event in 2007.

Judging with us tonight was the great Sheila Whyte, culinary guru, entrepreneur and owner of About Thyme, Ottawa's premier catering company, and an essential part of our team for almost as long as Anne; Janet Boileau, publisher, traveller, culinary historian, who can explain the ancestry of every element of every dish and who brings a unique global perspective to our adjudications; Marc Lepine, Chef of Atelier, two-time Canadian Culinary Champion, and the inspiration for a whole generation of cooks; Cory Haskins, chef, student of food and Academic Chair for culinary arts at Algonquin College – in other words, the man who carries the future of Ottawa's food scene in his hands; and, of course, Chef Ian Carswell of Black Tartan Kitchen, crowned Ottawa-Gatineau's Kitchen Party champion in 2019 and only now relinquishing the title. As is customary at our party, he got the gastronomical ball rolling with a stunning little canapé of boar cheek with apple boar baklava, a dot of smoked cheddar chantilly and another of apple gastrique, a moment of boar fat "snow" and a foam made from apple and Dunrobin whiskey – the whole ensemble gone in a single bite.

All the dishes last night were of the highest quality – courageous, provocative statements from chefs who are true artists. Let me make special mention of the gorgeous red deer tartare from Chef Wapokunie Riel-Lachapelle of Terrasse Nikosi in Wakefield, Quebec, and of the delectable lamb from Chef Dominique Dufour of Gray Jay – both dishes that would have podiomed in most competitions. But this was a truly stellar field.

We awarded the bronze medal to Chef Justin Champagne of Perch. He centred his dish on a thick-cut fillet of lake trout from Lake Huron, killed using the humane Ike Jime method and aged for seven days at 1° C, which has the effect of making the flesh a little more dense and the flavour a touch more intense. The fish was quickly cured with fresh cedar then poached for 20 minutes in a warm dashi broth made from Canadian seaweed, aged mirin, shoyu and koji. It had a beguiling texture, quite firm, almost sticky, and altogether delicious. Chef had placed the fish over some dots of n'duja-like blood pudding infused with alder catkin and foraged sumac that added a subtle extra funkiness to its flavour. Beside the protein were three tiny perfect chanterelles that had been pickled in sake and were seasoned with dried fennel flowers and commas of a tangy fluid gel made from charred tomatoes, dulce and gochujang. A foamy sauce was created by emulsifying koji (grown at the restaurant in cedar trays) with cultured butter. Marigold greens and bachelor's buttons gave us a pungent little garnish while the whole dish was set over a woven quilt of translucent cucumber ribbons.

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A tiny roasted sunflower tuile in the shape of a leaf was the finishing touch. The trout was very much the centre of the dish, its unique taste and texture playing off the various other components so that each mouthful created a new effect and a different angle of appreciation. Chef chose a big, bright, refreshing wine as accompaniment – the 2020 Chardonnay from Stratus, which handled the complex flavours really well.

We gave the silver medal to Chef Éric Chagnon-Zimmerly of North and Navy, whose dish was unlike anything I have ever seen on a plate. Charcuterie is his passion but the inspiration for this creation came from his childhood – specifically the duck-themed paraphernalia that decorated his family’s cottage, and his grandfather’s collection of kaleidoscopes. In some ways, it could scarcely have been simpler – three circular slices of charcuterie, extremely thinly cut, laid out so that they were slightly overlapping in the centre, dotted with various embellishments in a pretty pattern. But oh, the meticulous labour that had gone into the dish! First he made a duck mortadella, studded with flecks of pork fat, raisined ground cherry and hazelnuts that looked like jewels when the sausage was sliced. Around it he wrapped squared-off strips of dark red duck breast, stuck on with a solution of transglutaminase and leek ash. Then the whole thing was rolled tightly, warmed sous-vide to activate the “meat glue” then frozen and sliced. Chef pointed out that the result looks like stained glass – but only the intricate fanciful stained glass windows of Harry Clarke come close in beauty. The three slices were finished with a multitude of tiny effects, flavours and textures: dots of duck fat aioli, little red rife wheat berries toasted until they were crunchy, elderberry capers, specks of crabapple fluid gel, green sorrel and tart pickled sea buckthorn berries. The final flourish was a scattering of edible gold leaf. “Slide your fork under a slice and roll it up then eat the whole thing in one,” Chef suggested. We did as we were told. It was a wonderful mouthful, full of contrasts and surprises but with the rich flavour of the duck a clear continuo. The pairing was a beer – Dominion City’s “Untamed Land” Emer Wheat Saison that drank like a sour beer, adding its own acidity to that of the sea buckthorn.

Winning the gold medal by a substantial margin of points and a unanimous decision was Chef Briana Kim of Alice. Her dish – plant-based like everything at Alice – was a wonderful adventure for the palate and merely listing the ingredients does not do her creation justice. She served it in a bowl – a timbale of the solid elements hidden under a miniature glass cloche filled with kombu smoke which was lifted off to release the scents of salty ocean, seaweed and campfire – hints of the flavours to come. Before we tasted, Chef poured a broth into the bowl, enlisting everything – a rich opaque liquid made from green tomatoes fermented in brine for two years, blended with koji butter and smoked kelp broth. This soup became the medium for the whole dish, part of every spoonful – for we were only given a spoon to eat it with, forcing us to combine elements, not pick them apart for separate analysis. Working down from top to bottom, 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. Below that, looking like strands of pulled pork, were fragments of rhubarb jerky that had been preserved in honey for a year, giving them an almost citric intensity and a delightfully chewy texture. Then came smoked maitake mushrooms that were cured in a seaweed and black garlic syrup. Below everything was a wonderfully earthy, toothsome soft porridge of charred corn and toasted barley. So many deep, resonant flavours – such skillful use of fermentation so that umami was created without anything brash or sour! Chef Kim’s pairing was impeccable – Pearl Morissette 2019 Irreverence, a remarkably lightweight, smooth, sophisticated blend of Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Chardonnay with a dash of Pinot Gris, each fermented separately in various ways and then aged together in a combination of concrete vessels and foudres.

So the Kitchen Party campaign has begun and we have our first champion. I can only say that Chef Kim, who won gold at Ottawa-Gatineau once before and knows what lies ahead, will be a most formidable competitor at February’s Culinary Championship!