

REGIONAL QUALIFIER FOR THE CANADIAN
CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP

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



Sebastian Perez of Isabelle Restaurant wins Toronto's Great Kitchen Party!

Friday night at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel in Toronto... It was the first time since 2019 that we had staged a full-fledged Great Kitchen Party! What does that entail? Fabulous food, ridiculously wonderful wines and whiskies, the chance to bid on unique, star-studded trips to places as far-flung as Vietnam, Verona, southern Spain and Ireland's wild Atlantic way, and spectacular entertainment. We heard awe-inspiring sets from the sensational Terra Lightfoot, from the inimitable Anne Lindsay, (first solo, then accompanied by supremely talented brethren Devin Cuddy and Sam Polley), and by the awe-inspiring Chilliwack – the first time we have ever brought an entire band on stage at one of our events. They played late into the night – hit after immortal hit from their 50-year songbook – while the sold-out crowd danced and partied in front of them. It was a magnificent evening, and a dazzling return to Toronto by the Kitchen Party.

Meanwhile, we culinary judges had work to do. I shall let our jury describe themselves: Sasha Chapman (Senior Judge for Toronto), “a writer who explores how food shapes our world.” Amy Rosen, “Amy’s latest is *Canada’s Best New Cookbook*. She also owns Rosen’s Cinnamon Buns.” Lucy Waverman, “food columnist Globe and Mail, award winning cookbook author. Passionate eater.” John Higgins, “Haggisracer, loves all things fast except fast food. Chef, competitor, judge, educator, mentor.” David Wolfman, “First Nations chef, GBC professor, television show host/producer, and culinary consultant.” Chris Johns, “Food and travel writer called ‘an aging Harry Potter’ by Gordon Ramsay.” And our 2019 Champion, Keith Pears, Chef of the new W Hotel in Toronto. As is KP’s wont, we invited him to prepare canapés for the VIP reception, and one of them in particular – a dainty dish of tuna sashimi in a Thai-style coconut broth – was one of the evening’s most delectable moments. Shucker Paddy (our dear friend Patrick McMurray) was also in attendance with a splendid bivalvular presentation, smoking oysters under a cloche with a hunk of smoldering Connemara peat. Close by, the students of Centennial College had their own “Next Generation” station, showcasing a number of irresistible treats.

But the main event, speaking from a gastronomical point of view, was the Chefs’ Competition. It is often the case (as it was in Ottawa, a few weeks ago) that one dish stands out as a clear and unanimous winner. Not this time! A great deal of discussion was needed to find daylight between the top four competitors. Mere percentage points separated them. Things were so close that although Jesse Vallins from Barberian’s came first in the eyes of two of the judges, with a gorgeous beef short rib that he cured and smoked like pastrami, he still did not reach the podium.

In the end we awarded the bronze medal to Frank Parhizgar, chef-patron of FK restaurant. His dish pleased everyone with its classical elegance and rich, lucid flavours. It consisted of two components, the first a disc of chicken mousseline fringed with soft cabbage leaf, and crowned with a shaving of black truffle and a crisp wafer of golden chicken skin. Beside was a wee slice of a terrine that layered roasted chestnut, sunchokes and more truffles – a satisfyingly robust textural contrast to the mousseline that brought and blended different nuanced flavours of earthy sweetness.

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Chef garnished it with peppery baby nasturtium leaves and crisp dimes of fried sunchoke. A simple chicken jus united the two principal elements while a small pool of green tarragon oil was a refreshingly vegetal touch. The dish, Chef explained, was inspired by the Burgundian style of the wine that accompanied it, the 2020 Gravity Pinot Noir from Flat Rock Cellars in Niagara.

Lorenzo Loseto, two-time past gold medallist and Canadian Culinary Champion emeritus, chef of George Restaurant, won the silver medal. He presented a drum of beef tartare, finely ground, not chopped, but still perfectly maintaining its textural integrity, subtly seasoned with ginger, shallot, cilantro and chili. Enhancing the cool meaty flavour was a thin layer of a sweet sauce based on a Japanese aburi, like a mildly curry-spiced mayo. This was hidden beneath a finely ground crumble of wild rice, potato and saffron couscous, its nuttiness and crunch a nice contrast to the beef. A hoop of crisp potato threads rose up from the top of the tartare, cradling a slaw of julienned squash and root vegetables with some fascinating threads of sweet-salty grapefruit peel – a marmalade moment that was totally unexpected. Elsewhere on the plate, on condiment duty for the tartare, was a chunk of pickled pine mushroom dotted with mustard seed, a teaspoonful of fermented black garlic purée, and a segment of peeled raw ruby grapefruit. A pale sauce of grapefruit water completed the plate. The wine match was a great success – the lightly sparkling Bisous Rosé NV from Malivoire, in Niagara, a pure Pinot Noir rosé that had the body to stand up to the beef and fresh apple and cherry notes to balance the dish's sly umami.

Our gold medallist and the new Toronto champion was Sebastian Perez of Isabelle Restaurant and Lounge at The Pearle Hotel in Burlington. Like so many of the evening's offerings, his dish reflected a decidedly classical approach, centred around a superb cut of saddle of red deer from Quebec, herb-crust and pan-seared medium rare. Lean but juicy and tender, and seasoned with a sprinkling of coffee-and-yuzu-flavoured Maldon salt, this was the stand-out protein of the entire evening and obviously delighted our guests, who awarded it the People's Choice prize (one of those rare occasions when the citizenry and the judiciary are in full agreement). The two thick slices of venison sat on a silky 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. Big chunks of sautéed lobster 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. It stuck up jauntily from the dish – as eye-catching as the fascinator on a duchess's hat. Chef's wine match was impeccable – the 2020 "Le Grand Clos" Pinot Noir from Le Clos Jordanne in Niagara, a wine that contributed its own complexities and intensity to the triumphant experience.

Huge congratulations to Chef Perez! We will taste his food again next year at the Canadian Culinary Championship in Ottawa. Meanwhile the party goes on – to Montreal on Monday and then westward to Edmonton.