

EDMONTON

Canada's Great Kitchen Party rolled into Edmonton earlier in the week and we were welcomed with amazing enthusiasm and treated to some delicious cooking.

The elevated judging table in the heart of The Edmonton Convention Centre was perfectly positioned to take advantage of the magnificent view, stretching across the Saskatchewan River Valley to the wide prairie sky and the setting sun beyond. It felt like the best seat in the house, if not the province.

Joining me at the table this year were six of Edmonton's finest palates, including World Association of Chefs' Societies, certified judge and international competitions committee member, Clayton Folkers and Food and travel writer, author and former CBC Edmonton food columnist, Twyla Campbell.

Cookbook author, Chef Brad Smoliak, one of three people I've now met who have cooked for the Queen Elizabeth II, was on hand along with Chris Wood, Executive Chef from St Michaels Health Group whose palate is as finely tuned as is his instinct for culinary talent. Edmonton's head judge, Mary Bailey, brought her impeccable taste and encyclopedic wine knowledge to bear and we were all delighted to welcome back last year's 2022 Canadian Culinary Championship Bronze Medalist, Executive Chef Serge Belair as our VIP guest judge.

While we judges hunkered down in our chamber – with bottles of Peak Cellars Goldie Red, Flat Rock 2020 Gravity Pinot Noir and Bella 2022 Sparkling Rouge to help the deliberations along – the cheers from the raucous crowd in the performance hall let us know that Steven Page, Kevin Fox, Craig Northey, along with special musical guest Barney Bentall, were putting on a stellar performance.

Between sets, emcee George Stroumboulopoulos kept everyone entertained with his usual charm and cool – he also graciously stayed late to chat and take pictures with his many adoring fans.

The crowd was fired up and I caught the tail end of some serious bidding wars before getting up to announce the winners.

For the first time this year, the People's Choice Award Winner was also a top pick of the judges. Everyone was impressed with Bri Campbell from May Restaurant's loving, delicious culinary tribute to a Mangalitsa pig named Zsa-Zsa. Yes, reader, we ate Zsa-Zsa, but her sacrifice was not in vain.

The lard went into the pastry crust, rendering it utterly tender and luscious. The meat mixed with fat was marinated in a blend of toasted coriander, cumin, chili flakes, paprika and mint. Ossabaw pork was cured with a warming spice blend of allspice, nutmeg, fresh garlic and parsley. Everything was combined with fresh chicken livers that had been soaking in flavourful buttermilk. Apricots steeped in whiskey syrup chopped and folded in along with toasted and salted pistachios. The pate was finished with a glaze of veal Cognac aspic – really technical stuff that chef Bri showed incredible dexterity with. Alongside, bringing the heat and a sharp hit of acid, fermented Fresno and haskap gel and a root vegetable Branston pickle. Very impressive 2019 Pinot from Unsworth Vineyards on Vancouver Island.

Despite her admission that she doesn't especially enjoy cooking competitions, chef Winnie Chen from Fu's Repair Shop overcame this obstacle and walked away with the silver medal. To calm her nerves and ground herself, she turned to a classic comfort food from her childhood: congee. Melding ancient traditions with classical technique, her dish was built on a base made from toasted japonica rice cooked down in 4 day simmered pork and chicken bone broth.

Alongside a daikon and kimchi brined potato pave and a rilette of aged, shio koji brushed duck and pork melded together with– an all-time classic congee accompaniment: century eggs. Charred scallions, crispy chicken skin cracklings and an autumn fruit aspic added even more phenomenal flavour to each bite and her chosen paring, a complex, fresh and silky cabernet Sauvignon from Plot Winery

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brought this first-time competitor very, very close to the gold medal.

Ultimately, however, we judges simply could not deny chef JP Dublado's absolute powerhouse of a dish and awarded him the evening's gold medal. No stranger to the role, Chef Dublado won gold here in 2018 and while his dish won't be mistaken by anyone as basic, he claims that "compared to my previous dishes, this one is restrained. I think it shows my growth and maturity as a chef." We agreed.

His plate included three distinct components tied together by a deeply flavourful corn miso sauce. In the middle, a beautifully executed Hokkaido scallop kinilaw (often referred to as "Filipino ceviche") bound together with coconut milk and a calamansi lime and herb vinaigrette expertly balanced acidity and richness. Beside that was an impossibly delicate, translucent red beet tartelette holding half a sphere's worth of corn and foie gras cremeux glazed with "corn essence" and kappa. Finally, an ethereal BC sable fish and scallop mousse infused with buttery soy, mirin and miso flavours showed incredible dexterity and mastery of technique. Chef Dublado's choice of Frind Estate Winery's 2020 Chardonnay was an inspired and utterly complimentary pairing.

We're off to Winnipeg next to discover which chef will represent Manitoba at the Canadian Culinary Championship!