

Five outstanding Quebec chefs put together a competition for the ages earlier this week in Montreal. We took over the charming ITHQ dining room, with its bank of windows overlooking Saint-Louis Square, and both guests and judges were treated to some exceptionally high-level cooking.

En croute was the theme of the night with three of the five chefs choosing to gift wrap their offerings in pastry – a technique that felt especially appropriate considering that the city saw its first snow fall of the season that morning.

It was also exciting to see Quebec wines given such a prominent place among the pairings and it's clear that the oenological scene in the province is moving forward in leaps and bounds.

Our judging panel – consisting of writer, anthropologist and restaurant critic, Robert Beauchemin, cookbook author and wine enthusiast Lilly Nguyen, Editor in Chief of HRI magazine, Marie Pâris, along with our head judge for Quebec, journalist, food critic and host L'Épicerie on Radio Canada, Gildas Meneu – brought incredible expertise and comradery to the table.

Also joining us at the judging table was our 2022 Gold Medal Winner for Montreal and chef at Bab Kech: Imad-Eddine Makraji. As last year's winner, chef Makraji joins previous gold medalists from across the country as a member of our illustrious Hall of Fame.

Such was the level of cooking that the judges came to very different conclusions as to their favourite dishes of the night, making for some very lively judging, but once all the scores were tallied there was immediate agreement that our winning chef was the right choice. If anything, the initial disparity simply highlighted the fact that any one of the competing chefs would have done Quebec proud at the CCC.

Our bronze medal was awarded to chef David Bernard from Montreal's Josephine Restaurant. His dish, an homage to grand European cooking as interpreted through Quebec ingredients, drew inspiration from chef Karen Torosyan from BOZAR restaurant in Brussels. Encased in a hazelnut crusted pastry shell, chef layered LacBrome duck, Foie gras from Ferme la Canardiere and smoked Kamourska eel into a lavish confection.

Technically complex to the point of risky, the dish came together expertly while the pairing, an equally bold choice, of Plot Wine's 2021 Orange wine – a blend of Gewürtztraminer, Kerner, Muscat Ottonel and Orange Muscat – delivered freshness and jasmine florality, along with a vibrant, spicy citrus element, that brought the whole thing together.

From the modern Japanese restaurant, Nomi, Chef Remi Lemieux was our silver medal winner. His geometrically arranged plate of beef, eggplant, and red wine “sublimed” three ways each was a hit with both the judges and the audience. Chef's intention with the three ingredients and three preparations was to pay tribute to the Montreal restaurants that shaped him. Specifically, he paid tribute to chef Normand Laprise's legendary Le Toqué!, represented by the advanced techniques and joyful presentation. Le Mousso, where the chef began seriously studying fermentation, was evidenced on the plate by both the fermented honey glaze on the tongue

and the Koji used on the filet. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, his own restaurant, Nomi which represents the culmination of his cooking career, is where he brought all of his training to bear.

Playing with the idea of combining luxurious and humble ingredients in a single dish, his plate consisted of grilled filet mignon alongside honey glazed beef tongue topped with thinly sliced scales of grape “carpaccio” en gelee, both cuts sauced tableside with a superb beef and mirin jus. A delicate and carefully executed eggplant terrine was perfumed with the aroma of Makrut lime leaves, an unexpected but inspired combination. To pair with this substantial and deeply flavouful dish, chef turned to Vignoble de Pomone 2021 Sens Cuvée Reserve from Coteau-du-lac in Quebec, a deeply impressive red blend featuring such uncommon grapes as Marquette, Frontenac Noir and the magnificently named, Triomphe d’Alsace.

Rarely has a competition dish arrived at the judging table with a more luscious or appetizing aroma than chef Thomas Deschamp’s 18-hour braised pork cheek inside a puff pastry crust, served with a reduced cooking jus. Heady and fragrant, the plate also looked the part, all glazed, cherry-adorned circles, caramelized rectangles and deftly folded triangles.

Admittedly, even a delicious aroma and beautiful plate does not always translate to a winning dish – although it never hurts – and my first thought was: ‘please taste as good as you smell and look.’ I’m delighted to report: it did.

The way the dish took relatively humble ingredients: pork cheek, eggplant (pressed, roasted and topped with shards of fried leek and walnut-smoked

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puffed quinoa) yellow beets and sweet potato (shaped into a delicate ravioli flavoured with orange, honey and ginger) and fashioned them into something utterly luxurious and complex was thrilling.

Chef wisely chose to pair his excellent dish with Château des Charmes 2019 Cuvée Michèle pinot noir, a wine whose delicate tannins complemented the lusciousness of the pork cheeks and the reduced savoriness of the jus while the inherent dark fruit notes brought out the best in the creation's sweet elements.

Sad as it always is to say adieu to Montreal, we're changing cities once again and expect big things from the heavy hitters assembled for our Calgary event tonight!