

**REGIONAL QUALIFIER FOR THE
CANADIAN CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP**

Ensuring young Canadians have equitable access to healthy food, music education and sport opportunities.



OTTAWA REGIONAL COMPETITION - 2023

Ottawa was showing its best late last week, both outside in all its pre-equinox glory, and in the magnificent Wedgewood room in the Fairmont Chateau Laurier where a couple hundred of the city's best and brightest gathered to help us kick off the journey toward this year's Canadian Culinary Championship.

The evening marked my first official appearance as National Culinary Advisor and my excitement was, if I'm being perfectly honest, underscored by the daunting realization that the training wheels were now off, and we were playing for keeps. Fortunately, my predecessor, James Chatto, did such a stellar job of building out the role that he held for nearly 20 years, and helping prepare me to take on the task, that the evening came off without a hitch.

Credit for that must also go to the invaluable support of our newly appointed Senior Judge, Cory Haskins, who did a phenomenal job this year taking over from his predecessor, Anne DesBrisay. We also welcomed a brand-new judge, Jennifer Campbell, editor of Sage Magazine who fit in like she'd been there all along. Long-time Ottawa judges: Sheila Whyte, Marc Lepine and Janet Boileau brought a strong sense of continuity to our table, and we were also delighted to have Brianna Kim, our VIP guest judge and last year's Canadian Culinary Champion alongside.

Our small but mighty group was tasked with ranking the dishes from a group of chefs who came out swinging and brought a very high level of competition to this opening event. Six very strong competitors participated this year including Raghav Chaudhary of Aiana Restaurant, Oz Kafe's Kristine Hartling, Justin Champagne from Perch, Le Poisson Bleu's, Alex Bimm. Joining them was Eric Chagnon-Zimmerly of North and Navy who drew inspiration for his dish from a literally fantastic place. "I wanted to create a dish that resembled a landscape where a Fairy or Gnomes would be right at home," he wrote in his description.

On the plate this meant dark blue, pasta cut and pinched into an arrangement reminiscent of olive branches. Alongside, rounds of golden beet, plump little pickled cinnamon cap mushrooms, smoked maitakes, foamy cucumber bubbles - created with the aid of a fish tank pump - nasturtium leaves and grated mosciame, a cured tuna reminiscent of Japanese bonito. The whole scene was capped with an intense, tomato broth, poured tableside, that tied each element together and left the nasturtium leaves floating like lily pads.

The chef's experience working in cellars in Niagara informed his excellent pairing of a 2020 Charles Baker Cuvée du Boulanger whose effervescence balanced a fresh lemon zest component with more savoury elements to provide a refreshing contrast between bites.

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Le Poisson Bleu's, Alex Bimm, also dug into his childhood drawing on his experiences growing up beside the Gatineau River, where the local sturgeon were a source of reverence and terror – thanks to their apocryphal reputation as cat and baby eaters.

For his nose to tail sturgeon dish, the chef utilized every component of the sustainably caught fish: dry aging the flesh for three days before braising it in a broth made from the creature's own bones and head. Accompanying the filet was a rich, dark mousse composed of choice bits of fish offal and even eyeballs. Lacto fermented gooseberries provided the acidic lift. He paired the dish with Therianthropy's 2022 Mouflon, a wine whose delicate rose, verging on orange colour derives from the partial skin contact it receives during fermentation. The wine's rich mouthfeel and floral elements combined beautifully with the excellent sturgeon garum enhanced sauce that tied the whole dish together.

The People's Choice Award on this night went to Justin Champagne of Perch for his exquisite composition of Vancouver Island sourced sablefish cooked in the style of unagi. The dish highlighted the chef's skills by utilizing a wide variety of techniques from the caramelized sauce balanced with sable fish garum to the clarity of the intense pork and shiso broth. Grounding the dish were a few toothsome bites of toasted rye tossed with charred cabbage puree and balanced over the top, a delicate fishbone shaped tile made from the smoked sablefish trim. Lightfoot and Wolfville Vineyards from Nova Scotia provided the counterintuitive wine pairing with their compelling interpretation of the ancient central European wine grape, Kekfranko – a cool climate red, with a tannic structure strong enough to withstand the many umami elements that informed the dish.

Our bronze medalist, chef Kristine Hartling of Oz Kafe, delivered a deceptively simple dish of Steelhead Trout Pastrami. Her ultra-tender, silky and deeply flavourful fish was dry cured in a spice rub for several days, rinsed, coated in herbs blow torched, cold smoked, then sliced like gravlax and curled into petals on a plate atop a drift of crème fraiche with sumac pickled red pearl onions, fresh rhubarb and, for texture, some delicate rye and red currant crackers. Huff Estates' Getaway Rose, with its fresh, red fruit notes that spoke eloquently to so many elements of the dish and tart acidity that refreshed the trout's richness, readying tasters for the next bit, provided the pairing. Silver went to chef Raghav Chaudhary who, deciding that less was more, simply described his dish as: "Shuck It – The Flavours of Acadia."

What that translated into was an immaculate dish inspired by the chef's journey across Eastern Canada as he was developing the concept for his restaurant, Aiana. In particular, he drew on the love he found there for the variety and excellence of the chowder. Chef Chaudhary and his team ingeniously created an entirely edible oyster shell, complete with herbs to suggest a healthy growth of algae, that bedded down on a tiny ring of crispy fried land moss. Inside the shell, to suggest the oyster, was a wee round of

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scallop surrounded by caviar-sized lemon pearls. Around the dish, chef poured a rich, velvety, almost velouté-like, chowder. Alongside, matching richness with richness, chef paired the 2021 Stratus White, a blend of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, with a touch of Semillon, that brought a harmonious floral lushness and lemony freshness to the whole dish

In a decision that came down to the narrowest margin, our gold medal was awarded to a dish that featured some of the humblest ingredients of any in Kitchen Party history, but treated in such a way that they were transformed into something that conveyed pure luxury.

Chef Khalid Farchoukh of Carben Food + Drink started his dish by blanching whole corn, complete with its husk. The rough outer leaves were removed, and the tender ones charred and infused in oil to create a smoky sweet corn husk emulsion. He then removed the kernels, before torching and then glazing them with beef bone marrow and corn miso glaze. Beef appeared again in a few more unexpected ways: as shaved, smoked beef heart, in a rich beef fat brioche toasted in tallow and in a sauce built from roasted marrow bones cooked in a corn ear stock. Two further sauces, a lime gel and a fermented chili romesco brought further complexity to a dish in which no two bites were the same.

Prince Edward County's Lighthall Winery, an underappreciated gem of a spot, provided the flawless pairing with a 2019 Chardonnay whose buttery richness and delicate salinity both complemented the corn and supported the various beef components.

Congratulations to all our chefs for setting such a high bar at this year's inaugural event. We're off to Kelowna next where a stellar lineup of the Okanagan's best winery chefs awaits!

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