

Saskatoon Kitchen Party Report

By Noelle Chorney

It was a chilly but snow-free November evening as guests arrived at TCU Place for the 2023 Great Kitchen Party competition in Saskatoon. They filled a warm, bright space made livelier by the bold and often playful music of the Steven Page Trio. The crowd was also lively – they were particularly engaged and generous during the live auction.

The generosity extended to the food and drink stations, with guests enjoying creations from nine competing chefs, as well as the VIP station where Steve Squier, last year's gold medalist and CCC competitor and Executive Chef at Picaro Cocktails & Tacos and Cohen's Beer Republic invited VIP guests to whet their appetites with a crispy rice cracker cupping delicate poached pickerel cheeks and pickled chanterelles with spruce crème and radish, or uniform, bite-sized pucks of Cohen's popular buttermilk fried chicken, topped with dill ranch and caviar.

This year the competition expanded its reach beyond Saskatoon's borders to include chefs from Lumsden, Nipawin and Shaunavon, among them a former Regina GKP gold medalist, returning and first-time competitors. Never in my history with Canada's Great Kitchen Party has competition been so fierce at Saskatoon's regional event. All the dishes were delicious, creative and visually beautiful feats that each chef should be proud of.

This year wasn't the first time that the People's Choice Award went to someone who didn't stand on the podium. Scott Dicks from Odlā offered the crowd favourite of lamb loin served alongside candy cane striped caramelle with a dilled potato filling over fermented beet and sour cherry demi-glace and whipped goat feta, dusted with fresh horseradish and matched to Closson Chase 2021 Vineyard Pinot Noir.

To underline the tightness of this pack, let me just say that three competitors were within two percentage points of third place, and the others mere points behind. Sadly, there is only room for one on the bronze medal podium, and on this evening the wine match made the dish.

By a narrow margin, the bronze medal went to first time competitor Chef Michael Brownlee from Mabel Hill Farm Kitchen and Marketplace near Nipawin. He served lamb two ways: first, rack of lamb, frenched, cooked sous-vide to medium and then brushed with spruce tip syrup and crusted with a dried herb mixture and pan-roasted at his station. Lam shoulder was braised and shredded,

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seasoned with jus, and the warming flavours of cloves and cinnamon. Finishing elements included northern forest elements such as wild mushroom escabeche, high bush cranberry gel and pickled spruce tips. The dish was paired with the rich and delicious Hester Creek Estate Winery's 'The Judge' 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon, picking up all the bold herbal notes in the lamb with a texture reminiscent of velvet.

Judges were unanimous on the top two competitors, although first and second place varied from scoresheet to scoresheet. The silver medal was awarded to Chef Alex Stephenson from UNA Pizza & Wine. He offered a cherry cured duck breast alongside a raviolo expertly filled with chanterelle conserva and duck confit. It was served on top of a hay roasted sunchoke purée and brightened with a pine nut and Meyer lemon gremolata, pickled mustard seed and sour cherry preserve. A crisp of duck prosciutto balanced on top of the pasta offered some crunch and the chef finished each dish with a shot of foie gras espuma added at the table. The dish was paired with Mayhem Wines 2021 Cabernet Merlot.

Chef Garret Thienes from Harvest Eatery earned the gold medal for his dish that offered 'a whole rabbit on one plate'. The saddle was brined, stuffed with wild northern mushroom duxelles, rolled into a roulade and wrapped with smoky speck and served over a smoked yellow potato and sunchoke purée. He used rabbit kidneys and livers to create a parfait served atop a crumpet made from a duck fat confit of the rabbit's foreleg. The plate was a riot of colour and flavour with seasoning and balance offered by plum mustard, Kewpie mayo tarragon aioli, rhubarb fluid gel, and an impossibly rich sauce made from roasted rabbit bones and thickened with pigs' blood and a bit of chocolate. Screaming Frenzy 2020 Pinot Noir played beautifully with the bolder elements of the dish but also allowed the more delicate fruit and herbal flavours to shine through. We drank a lot of Pinot Noir that night but this one really stood out, as did this beautifully executed dish.

My enthusiastic congratulations to Garret on his second opportunity (he represented Regina in 2017) to compete at the 2024 Canadian Culinary Championships!