

## Calgary Culinary Report 2024

Our last stop for the year was also one of the most hotly contested with all eight chefs offering up podium-worthy dishes. Indeed, when the scores were tallied, less than 1% separated our bronze, silver and gold medal winners.

It was a tough job for us judges, but a tasty one. My thanks to all the brilliant palates involved including food and travel writer, Calgary Herald restaurant columnist and CBC radio columnist: Elizabeth Chorney-Booth. 2009 Canadian Culinary Champion. Culinary Instructor at Southern Alberta Institute of Technology/ SAIT, Hayato Okamitsu. CBC Radio restaurant reviewer and Calgary Herald's long time restaurant columnist and host of the Cuisine of the Rockies (now streaming on TUBI), John Gilchrist and Carmen Cheng, food writer for CBC and Avenue Magazine. We were also delighted to welcome back as our VIP chef, last year's Gold medalist for Calgary and current Canadian Culinary Championship Silver Medalist: Rupert Garcia. And finally, our head judge for Calgary and someone who was instrumental in assembling this phenomenal collection of chefs for us: cook, master chef and dishwasher, Michael Allemeier.

Our first dish of the night came from Salt and Brick chef, Alejandro Buzzalino who, in what has to be a Kitchen Party first, presented the judges with a yuzu and apple "slurp tube" (think: Jello Slurpie in a test tube). We were instructed to "slurp" the ingredients down in one go and then move on to the main offering, a playful take on Eric Ripert's famous pounded bluefin tuna and Foie gras torchon dish that he serves at Le Bernardin in New York (where, coincidentally, I celebrated my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and ate that very dish).

Chef Buzzalino's version included a thin slice of toasted Japanese milk bread topped with a rich and silky foie gras mousse lightened with yuzu peel and juice that encircled a chopped negi-toro tartar made from hamachi belly, green onion, and diced green apple. Draped over that was veil of onsui Hamachi loin that had been pounded out to a thin sheet. Green apple, locally grown purple shamrock sorrel, a crunchy tuile and dots of our yuzu ponzu gel finished the plate. This extremely wine friendly dish found its soulmate in the form of Lightning Rock's 2021 Elysia Vineyard Blanc de Noirs, a vibrant and effervescent sparkler that opened with a crisp minerality that evolved into a long, buttery finish. Other highlights of the evening included chef Shamir Bechara from Bar Chouette and his thoughtful meditation on duck in all its incarnations. A blushing slice of duck breast stuffed with a luscious black truffle mousseline accompanied a Rougie

Farms foie gras ganache, a crisp porcini buñuelo and a silky roasted carrot puree. Tying everything together was a masterful Madeira demi-glace and Featherstone Estate Winery's brooding, herbaceous, gently spicy 2021 Cabernet Franc.

Francis Martinez of Fine Print Calgary proved once again that he is a fierce competitor. Last year, chef Martinez offered up a duck confit and mushroom sausage that won him the People's Choice award and this year he may have even raised the bar with an excellent Alberta Lamb Presse that featured a combination of lamb belly, Jospet smoked lamb ribs and mangalitsa fat enriched with a wild mushroom farce and formed into a deeply savoury and tender presse. Alongside, a velvety carrot and lemongrass purée, a tangy-sweet agrodolce sauce and pistachio and mint gremolata. The ultra-savory, but brightly punctuated flavours were a natural fit for Poplar Grove's outstanding 2020 Merlot.

Pure Street Food's, Lam Pham drew on his childhood memories from Vietnam for his outstanding dish: Shrimp, Crab and Texture. A generous portion of rich, butter seared black tiger shrimp was accompanied by a tender parcel of Dungeness crab and squash dumpling. Crab was again utilized in an elegant salad dressed with a chili, passion fruit vinaigrette while a lemongrass panna cotta introduced a creamy element. Tying the whole dish together was a deeply flavourful Thai red curry bisque and 50th Parallel's 2020 bright, citrusy Riesling.

The evening's People's Choice winner, Jun Young Park from Ryuko Restaurant, presented an exceptional seafood tasting featuring Kombu cured Hokkaido scallop, sake cured side striped prawn, fresh Hokkaido sea urchin and maple cured salmon roe. The exceptionally fresh and flavourful ingredients were harmonized together by a coconut and green curry dressing with green shiso oil petalled throughout. Chef chose the 2023 Woo Woo Vines Gewurtztraminer from Dirty Laundry because he wanted a pairing that emphasized balance and layers. "The wine has a rose and lychee flavour with hints of bubblegum and pickled ginger," he explained, adding: "I wanted to bring out the warmth in the wine, even though both the wine and the dish are served cold."

Our bronze medalist, Jenny Kang from Orchard Restaurant, was inspired by kimbap (Korean seaweed rice rolls) and expanded on that simple idea into a dazzling presentation entitled: Seafood Garden Vol. 2. Instead of the usual nori, chef wrapped her prawn and scallop kimbap in gamtae, a delicate seaweed with an almost truffle-like aroma, and then an additional layer of scallop cake. A simple potato tart formed into a tiny bowl held ankimo (monk fish liver) that was blended with foie gras. A square of delicate and deeply satisfying white kimchi was

enhanced with a gel of the same to create one of two sauces on the plate. The other, an inspired Korean/French hybrid sweet miso Normandy sauce, brought a sharp, umami richness to the dish. With so many flavours on the plate, the pairing would be a challenge, but chef called in an intriguingly herbaceous and almost vegetal cabernet franc rose from Gold Hill Winery that managed to bring balance to the whole dish.

Inching out chef Kang to take silver was Sauvage chef, Tracy Little who took the bold, but risky decision to showcase a dessert for her dish: Milk and Honey.

To say the dish consisted of white chocolate cremeaux almond tart with clarified milk punch curd, maple scented white chocolate mousse, apricot fluid gel and a honey sorbet paired with Vineland's 2017 Vidal Icewine, gives a sense of the dish, but not its essence. The aromas of almond, honey, anise and sarsaparilla as well as lightly soured milk along with the clove, nutmeg and citrus aspects of the ice wine created a richly aromatic dish with a surprising inspiration. "My daughter, Isla Harrison was born a few months ago," chef Little explained, "and this dessert is meant to evoke that delicious smell of a newborn baby's head."

Our gold medal winner also took some chances that paid off. Primary Colours chef, Matthias Fong reimagined a controversial luxury ingredient, Foie Gras, in vegetarian form. To create this remarkable illusion, he began by cooking down walnuts and mushrooms and then whipping together with not a little amount of butter to create a mousse that exhibited both the texture, colour and richness of foie gras. To offset the mousse, layers of pureed sea buckthorn berries with their intense citrus and pineapple flavours, were incorporated. Texture came in the form of a honeycomb shaped and honey flavoured tuile as well as a walnut and brown butter crumble. To take the luxury element even one step further, chef included shavings of fresh black truffles grown on Vancouver Island. The wine pairing for the dish, Upper Bench Estate Winery's Riesling, worked both in the glass – thanks to its lemon meringue and pineapple aromas – as well as on the plate, as chef had, through the careful use of sodium alginate and calcium chloride, turned the wine into edible, spherical pearls.

It was a blowout dish for what's been a phenomenal series of celebrations. With our 10 chefs from 10 of Canada's most delicious city's determined, we are setting our sights on Ottawa where we will determine the 2025 Canadian Culinary Champion.