



THE CANADIAN CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP 2024

CULINARY REPORT

By Chris Johns, National Culinary Advisor

The excitement was palpable as Canada's best chefs, the winners of regional competitions from across the country, gathered in Ottawa to decide who would become this year's Canadian Culinary Champion. To earn the title, these ten chefs would undergo a series of gruelling tests that would call upon all of their skills and resources.

The weekend's competition began with the mystery wine pairing challenge in which the chefs were given a bottle of wine that no one other than National Wine Advisor, David Lawrason, knew the provenance of. After tasting and analyzing the wine, a bold and complex red, the chefs were each given \$550 to purchase the ingredients they needed to create a dish for all 250 guests, plus eight judges, that perfectly matched the nuance of the wine.

They were up to the task and by the end of the competition, when it was revealed that Lawrason had chosen a rare **Lailey Vineyard's Zweigelt**, the chefs were neck and neck with only a quarter of a percent separating the top three and less than three percent between first place and eighth.

This meant it was still anyone's game going into the black box competition on Saturday morning.

The audience gathered in the spectacular atrium of La Cite College to watch the proceedings that were broadcast around the room on a massive, wraparound screen. It is a spectacular venue and one that further confirms my belief that the Black Box is the sleeper hit of the whole weekend's festivities.

The head judges and I assembled what would prove to be a punishing batch of ingredients including sake lees from **Artisan Sake Maker's** Masa Shiroki, a selection of lovely chicories from Gaetan Cyr, the last of the season's sunchokes, whole grain farro from our friends at Flourist, and the soft lactic bloomy rind cheese known as Le Figaro from **Glengarry Fine Cheese**. To keep the chefs on their toes, we also included a batch of tender duck tongues from **Mariposa Farm** and pristine Greenland Halibut from the fine folks at **Baffin Fisheries**.

From this chaotic box of ingredients, and with the help of the kitchen's pantry of staple ingredients, chefs were given one hour to transform the items into two chef-worthy dishes that between them utilized all seven ingredients. The tight timeline and esoteric nature of the black box really put these chefs to the test. Nonetheless, we judges were treated to some beautifully prepared plates. The fish in particular was always cooked *à point*, although marrying all of the ingredients together proved challenging.


By the end of the morning, after the scoring was completed, it was still anyone's title to win and that meant that the pressure was still on going into the Grand Finale.

As the sold out crowd gathered at the Shaw Center, the chefs put the finishing touches on the signature dishes they have been working on, tweaking and improving, since they won their regional competitions in the fall.

All the chefs came to compete, but even from outside it was obvious that a great camaraderie had developed between each of them. Indeed, by the end of the weekend, several of the chefs talked about how much they appreciated the opportunity to meet with their peers from across the country and the "lifelong friendships" they made. I know that I speak on behalf of all of the judges and organizers when I say it is an honour to be a part of something that fosters that kind of experience and goodwill.

As the evening progressed, the final podium standings began to take shape and after the last plate was served and the scores from each of the competitions tallied, we had our winners.

Our Bronze Medalist this year was JP Dublado from Red Deer Resort and Casino. It was his second award of the weekend, having won the People's Choice during the Mystery Wine pairing competition. For the finale, his refined, elegant dish 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 complementary pairing.

Taking home the silver was fellow Albertan Rupert Garcia from Hawthorn at The Fairmont Palliser. Chef Garcia started with his wine pairing wine, Monte Creek Winery’s 2021 Hands Up Red, and built his dish of “Steelhead Trout Textures” around it. On the plate, three virtually translucent, deeply flavourful discs of nori cured BC trout. Alongside, grilled apple crème fraiche, cranberry apple fluid gel, applewood smoked caviar and a compelling confit belly brandade. Each component was a delight on its own, but when combined with the ever evolving wine, it was a triumphant.

Our gold medal, and the title of Canadian Culinary Champion went to Jasper Cruickshank from Wild Blue Restaurant + Bar in Whistler. The combination of skillful technique, refined presentation and

phenomenal flavour left no doubt that this “Wild BC Experience” was destined for the podium. His restrained, almost minimalist presentation featured three main components anchored by a wakame leek crisp that branched out across the plate. Some judges were most impressed by the excellence of chef’s terrine of side stripe shrimp topped with verjus pickled tapioca. Others cited the shatteringly crisp feuille de brick tartelette filled with poached Dungeness crab and topped with an utterly luscious crab espuma. The whole dish was seamlessly tied together by the spicy, apple blossom and lemon zest aromas of the Roche Wines, 2021 Tradition Pinot Gris.

An enormous thank you goes out to everyone who made the weekend’s festivities work so smoothly, our musical guests, Terra Lightfoot, Kevin Fox and Steven Page, who performed so brilliantly. The volunteers, especially those who served the judges with such expertise. And, of course our sponsors, Air Canada, Zalto Stemware, Staub and Knifewear for providing such phenomenal prizes to our winning chefs.

I also want to thank the students from Algonquin College who so ably and expertly assisted our chefs. Their enthusiasm was palpable, not only in the raucous cheers they offered during the awards ceremony, but throughout the competition. With any luck we’ll see some of them back as competitors in the years ahead.