

Edmonton Culinary Report

Outside, the Aurora Borealis lit up the night sky in dazzling fashion while inside the convention centre Edmonton's finest chefs put on a spectacular show of their own.

Once again, the city was out in full force with over 600 in attendance to see what the city's best chefs were cooking up and they were in for a treat.

Before the competition began, chef Eric Hanson of the Marc, told me that this would be his last time competing. "Some of the defining moments of my career happened because of this competition," he acknowledged, adding: "It has pushed me further and harder than I ever thought I could go." If there was a prize for heartwarming testimonials, chef Hanson would certainly have received gold.

As it was, chef tweaked and perfected his dish over the course of nearly a month before he felt it was ready for his final competition. Like many competitors in Edmonton this year, chef Hanson built his dish around the wine, Summer Hill Cipes Brut, instead of trying to pair a dish with a wine after the fact. The classic Okanagan sparkler, with its aromas of fresh apple, citrus zest and toasted brioche is a natural for seafood and that's exactly the direction the dish went.

On the plate, a torched langoustine clutched a single, plump prawn that was cured in acidulated cucumber juice while a morsel of Nova Scotia Lobster poached in Red River garlic butter balanced atop lobster salad dressed in mint raita for an unexpected twist.

Bison was the protein of the night with excellent preparations served by both Naga Singh from Belgravia Hub who prepared the bison two ways serving it alongside a vibrant purple ube puree, green curried sponge, pickled bamboo and coconut gel. Chartier Restaurant's Tamara Solon's clever preparation, paired with Frind 2022 Premier Merlot, started with Synch Homestead bison inside round that she first turned into a tartare and then formed into thin rounds of carpaccio. A creamy foam made from Sylvan Star Grizzly Gouda added complexity while lacto fermented haskap berries and spruce tips brought welcome hits of fruity acidity and herbaceousness.

PYRO Wood-Fired Grill & Kitchen chef, Max Straczek offered up a sophisticated and technically exacting Pate built from pork head rilette, tongue, shoulder and belly. Overtop, he draped a clear, tea-coloured mushroom gelee and added a lacy tuile of crispy pig ears. Cedar Creek's 2021 Pinot Noir with its smooth tannins and balanced acidity, revealed a subtle, but evocative barnyard aroma that underscored the earthy heartiness of the pate.

Chef Joseph Vuong from Café Bicyclette drew inspiration from an old Chinese proverb, "North and South are One Family" that denotes tradition and harmony. The result was a plate of deeply savoury black garlic and Chinese miso braised beef wrapped in crisp potato strings. Dried scallop and soy cucumber-carrot noodles accompanied while a Teochew marinated shrimp brought a touch of heat. With all of the varied components on the plate, it took a wine like Henry of Pelham 2022 Old Vines Baco Noir to pull everything together.

It is an indication of how strong the competition was in Edmonton this year, that none of those dishes made the podium.

Going into the judge's chambers it was still anyone's competition to win, but the judges were up to the task. Our panel consisted of Clayton Folkers, World Association of Chefs' Societies certified judge, Brad Smoliak, culinary mentor and Twyla Campbell CBC Edmonton food columnist and author.

We were also happy to have the insights of Edmonton Convention Centre Executive Chef and Canadian Culinary Championships Bronze Medalist, Serge Belair. Last year's winner, JP Dublado, attended as our VIP chef and guest judge for the night while leading this merry band of culinary authorities was her excellence, Mary Bailey, magazine editor, podcaster and Head Judge for Edmonton.

When our scores were tallied it was first time competitor Julia Kundera from Out of Bounds Restaurant at Cattail Crossing Golf & Winter Club taking home the bronze. Her dish, an exploration of her Polish heritage, was marked by beautiful, clean flavours and her cooking had depth and personality. Alongside slices of seared duck breast reclined the most beautiful and tender little minced duck, mushroom and buckwheat cabbage roll baked in duck jus, each one hand rolled into supple tenderness. Sweet and acidic BC plum sauce and a silky carrot puree finished off the dish and Fielding winery's 2022 Cabernet Franc, all black cherry, plum, fresh thyme and licorice, provided the elegant pairing.

Our silver medal winner conceived his dish by starting from the pairing: a fresh, but sour Barrel Aged Mixed fermentation sour ale, dry hopped with

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Hallertau hops. Inspired by the brew, chef Jason Greene of Braven restaurant thought first of what he most would like to eat with the crisp, bright and refreshing beer and the answer was obvious: tacos. Tongue tacos, to be exact, built around a Lakeside Dairy Wagyu Beef tongue brined pastrami style for 48 hours and then cooked sous vide for a further two days.

The tender tongue was served between hand pressed tortillas made from organic masa provided by Maiiz Nixtamal in Victoria, BC. Completing the dish a riot of envelope pushing salsas and garnishes including Wagyu fat black garlic aioli, fortified beef and mushroom demi-glace, ancho chilies and shaved dark cocoa lime gel and a tajin spice fried onion tulle.

As impressive as that was, one dish ultimately surpassed it to take home the gold: Doreen Prei's perpetration of lobster and scallop with a sea buckthorn panna cotta, micro sorrel, peas and uni vinaigrette.

Like our silver medal winner, chef Prei Reverse engineered her dish after finding inspiration in the JoieFarm 2023 A Noble Blend. "As soon as I tasted that wine," she told me, "I was immediately transported to the Baltic Sea and the first flavour that settled into me was Sea Buckthorn, also known as the citrus fruit of the north, that grows around there." The result was as harmonious a partnership between dish and wine as this competition has produced.