

Montreal 2024 Culinary Report

An elegant, candle lit study in a grand Victorian mansion served as our judging headquarters for our Montreal regional qualifier. It was an opulent setting for what would prove to be an equally impressive competition.

This year's qualifier included contestants from around Quebec, two from Montreal, Donnel English of Bar George, and Rosélys chef, Edgar Trudeau-Ferrin, along with Quebec City's François-Emmanuel Nicol from Tanière³ and Maxime Delmont of LUMAMI du Balnea in Bromont.

Joining them, although not competing, was our VIP chef and judge, last year's Montreal gold medalist from Les Têtes Brûlées in Mascouche – as well as the soon to open and cheekily named, Tabernac – chef Thomas Deschamps.

Also at the beautifully set table were writer, anthropologist and restaurant critic, Robert Beauchemin, former director of the Guide Restos VOIR, and current writer for Tastet and Le Devoir as well as the Quebec correspondent for Star Wine List, Marie Paris. Award-winning cookbook author and wine enthusiast, Lilly Nguyen and our Head Judge for Montreal, the always dapper Gildas Meneu. tv and radio gastronomic journalist, writer and gourmand.

Our first dish of the night – served with a foamy, ombre shaded cocktail built around Menaud Gin infused with cheese, beet foam and Walnut bitters – was presented by chef Edgar Trudeau-Ferrin. He began his dish by brining and smoking duck egg yolks and then blanketing them with a luscious light cream sauce built around the same Zacharie Cloutier cheese the gin was infused with (a type of aged, firm goat cheese not dissimilar to Manchego). Chanterelles and caramelised black walnuts adding intriguing earthy notes while spears of samphire introduced a saline element and the whole thing was buoyed by the sweet acidity of Minashkuat, a phenomenal balsamic style vinegar created from wood foraged ingredients.

Our next dish and the one that would deservedly go on to win the People's Choice Award was from Bar George chef, Donnel English. "The idea of the dish was to bring my Caribbean influences into my journey here in Canada," he told us. "I wanted to work with flavours that would showcase my Caribbean background with the knowledge I obtained from my experiences here in Montreal while highlighting flavours I grew up with but adding a modern twist." To that end he offered a single, impossibly tender butter poached scallop placed atop a ring of confit potato garnished with tamarind gel for acidity, prosciutto bits for texture and shaved bottarga to underscore the overall brininess. Tying everything together was a luscious coconut sauce that could not have been a better partner for Cave Spring's 2021 Niagara Peninsula Riesling.

Balena Spa chef Maxime Delmont honoured his grandparents – great farmers and cooks, according to the chef – by drawing from his memory of his grandmother's roast chicken with turnips and mushrooms. While the inspiration may have been rustic, the assembled dish was anything but. A perfect, rectangular slice of pressed chicken breast and thigh was layered with wild mushrooms and topped with crisp skin. Beside it, a tartlet held the bird's earthy liver beneath a careful arrangement of La Villa vinegar marinated turnip petals in varying hues of pink and white. Rounding out the geometric plate was an ultra-crisp croustade of thigh and chicken skin atop a puree of turnip and turnip greens. La Côte's 2021 chardonnay, done in a classic Burgundian style, added further richness and minerality adding freshness while underscoring the earthiness of the offal and iron richness of the chicken livers.

Before receiving what would turn out to be our gold medal winning dish, we judges were torn from the plush comfort of our study/dining room/chambers and brought upstairs to what was, admittedly, another lovely room. Here, a bartender sliced great columns of prickly ash flavoured bubbles out of a beaker and floated them atop a curvaceous collection of ornamental gourds, sliced open like coconuts for drinking. Inside, Acerum from Mitis Distillery was mixed with Quebec pumpkin seed orgeat and thyme infused pumpkin water to create chef François-Emmanuel Nicol's pairing for his picanha of beef in crust of spices with roasted spaghetti squash, confit tomato and eggplant cooked with prickly ash pepper. Supporting and underscoring those

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complex flavours was a superbly judged beef jus and gel of tomato water that expertly matched the sauce's viscosity.

With our third competition of the year wrapped up, we've already got a strong lineup of contenders for this year's Canadian Culinary Championship in Ottawa. Our next stop is Edmonton with Vancouver and St. John's in quick succession after that. Will the quality remain this high or could the bar possible even be raised. I can't wait to find out.