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CANADIAN CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP**

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OTTAWA 2024 Culinary Report

The finest chefs in the nation's capital put on a stellar performance on Wednesday night and once again proved that Ottawa is a city to be reckoned with when it comes to culinary talent.

Our event at the The Chateau Laurier always seems to coincide with some eminent visit – last year it was Volodymyr Zelensky who was having dinner in a private room just down the hall from us and this year Emmanuel Macron was in residence. I can't say for certain if the French President popped in for a glass of wine or a bite to eat as we judges were too deeply immersed in the task at hand, but he would have been well fed if he did.

Joining me at the judge's table this year were Taste & Travel publisher, culinary historian, world traveler and global eater, Janet Boileau along with award-winning entrepreneur, community leader, culinary advisor and champion of food security, Sheila Whyte. Jennifer Campbell, writer and editor of Sage, Sage60 and STUFF Magazines rounded out the literary side of the table. Representing the chefs, Former Canadian Culinary Champion and owner of the soon-to-open Antheia restaurant, Brianna Kim, joined us and, of course, as last year's CCC representative from Ottawa, Raghav Chaudhary Executive Chef of Aiana restaurant was alongside as our VIP guest judge. Ottawa's Head Judge, none other than Academic Chair at Algonquin College for culinary arts, former chef and student of food, Cory Haskins also brought his expertise to the table.

Lizardo Becerra of Raphael Peruvian Cuisine was our first chef of the night and what a beautiful dish he presented. Garnet slices of cured and torched Gitanyow sockeye salmon rested on top of a velvety almond and sweet potato puree while spheres aji limo and aji panca peppers delivered subtle bursts of fruity, acidic heat. Surrounding this colourful composition, a dark, almost black demi-glace crossed with a vinegary escabeche sauce made a great visual contrast while toasted amaranth seeds and puffed rice crackers delivered texture.

It would take a complex wine to pair with such a dynamic dish and chef Becerra's choice of the 2022 B-Side Riesling, with its crisp apple and citrus overtones proved very much up to the task, highlighting the savoury elements of the dish and echoing its richness.

Ten years after taking home the gold medal in Ottawa, chef Patrick Garland of Absinthe was back and once again delivered a phenomenal dish that took classic flavours, techniques and elements and rearranged them in surprising and delicious ways. Expertly seared scallops from Iles-de-Madeleine formed the heart of the dish and were supported by a complex, umami-rich fumet built

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from Lasqueti Island mussels, lobster and halibut. Alongside, a velvety cauliflower and basil puree added earthiness and herbaceousness to the mix while a 2011 Estate Grown Chardonnay from Tawse had enough age on it to bring out certain tertiary elements: marzipan, hazelnut, ginger that worked in powerful ways alongside the umami components in the dish.

The magnificent, rich, nutty aroma of curry leaves announced the arrival of Katha restaurant chef Sarath Teegavarapu's story within a dish. Named *Nava Setu*, meaning the bridge of flavours, chef's dish was created to invoke and pay homage to the ancient migration route that connects Sri Lanka and India. A classic turmeric infused Sri Lankan sothi (a classic coconut milk-based curry) derived added complexity from the addition of miso broth. The greenish, golden sauce held alternating drops of bright green and red chili and curry leaf oils that gave the bowl a soothing lava-lamp like quality. Tender salt and spice cured branzino, imbued with lime leaf aromas, was texturally offset with a twisted crisp of murukki, a type of south Indian cracker snack, tapioca pearls and bright red tobiko. Rosehall Run's 2023 Pinot Gris gracefully accompanied the dish, allowing its deep flavours to shine through, while balancing its inherent richness.

Last year's bronze medalist, Kristine Hartling of Oz Kafe was back again this year with a dish inspired by her Acadian heritage that blended traditional ideas with modern techniques. She salted and pressed king oyster mushrooms before marinating them in a savoury black pepper and molasses glaze, giving them a light smoking and then skewering the morsels and finishing them on the grill. A Johnny cake crisp, some excellent stewed navy beans and a red pepper relish rounded out the plate. In keeping with the laid-back nature of the dish, chef chose the malty, Stranger Than Fiction, porter from Collective Arts Brewing in Hamilton.

Stofa Restaurant's Jason Sawision was up next, and he came through in style with a powerhouse of a plate featuring smoked pork hock and confit chicken pressé, inspired by his time working at the legendary Eigensinn Farm. The dish included a veritable library of superb Canadian ingredients from Nutty Neighbours hazelnuts, in Beamsville, miso and koji sourced from San-O in Montreal, chanterelles from Stark North, oxeye daisy capers from Forbes Wild Foods and more. Tying everything together was a luscious, aerated brown butter hollandaise that could have come off as extravagant if it wasn't for the gentle tempering effects of Mason Vineyard's 2022 L'avenir unfiltered chardonnay.

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Even before our final dish arrived it was clear that it would be an extremely tight race with so many podium worthy dishes already having crossed our path. Chef Mitch Lacombe from Gitanes would not make the task any easier as he worked wonders with a spin on Mariposa duck L'Orange.

Slices of dry aged duck breast, crusted with Szechuan peppers, coriander and fennel along with dried lavender and fennel pollen, rested on a dark, slick of caramelized duck demi-glace imbued with fresh OJ, Grand Marnier and calamansi vinegar. Chef cooked the duck legs confit, turning the seasoned, shredded meat into a rilette that was layered into a tender potato, onion and duck fat pave and whipped up a textbook foie gras mousse seasoned with kumquat and Cointreau marmalade and topped with a crispy duck skin crumble. The tried-and-true pairing of Pinot Noir – in this case the excellent 2021 Hidden Bench Felseck, a wine with distinct orange flower and cedar aromas and sweet spices on the palate –once again proved unimpeachable.

It was this dish, after all the numbers were crunched, that ended up capturing bronze on the evening with Stofa Restaurant's Jason Sawision picking up silver. The gold medal went home with Lizardo Becerra of Raphael Peruvian Cuisine, so he'll be joining Moncton's Jordan Holden in Ottawa for a shot at the Canadian Culinary Championship back here in January. In just over a week's time, we'll find out who will represent Montreal at that same event with Edmonton's competition coming up shortly after that.

On Sep 24, 2024, at 3:42 PM, Chris Johns <chrisandvinegar@gmail.com> wrote:

We're off and running! Canada's search for the next Canadian Culinary Champion began Friday night in Moncton and if the talent on display in that Maritime city is any indication we are in for a blockbuster year.

While the chefs gathered across two floors at the Aberdeen Cultural Center the judges assembled in a private boardroom ahead of the tasting. Tasked with finding our winner on this night was chef/instructor Evan Smith from the New Brunswick Community College. From Rossmount Inn,

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renowned chef and innkeeper, Chris Aerni was in place along with sommelier and executive director Food & Beverage Atlantic, Tammy Brideau.

We were also joined by Susan O'Keefe former co-chair of the World Wine & Food Expo, retired lawyer, home cook and all-around good sport. Matt Pennell, fresh from his triumph on Dragon's Den as one of the masterminds behind Sum Good hydrating freezies, was our returning VIP chef. And, of course, where would we be without our head Head Judge for Moncton, the excellent Emmanuel Charretier, chef Instructor of Hospitality and Tourism at New Brunswick Community College.

No sooner had our first plate been delivered than it seemed like we surely must have found the winner. Chef Niguel de Leon of Atelier Tony opened the competition with a stellar dish. His Story of the Scallop saw a plate defined by circles on circles on circles: sliced whole Nova Scotia scallops, crowned with rounds of pickled apples, topped with puffed quinoa all surrounding a bubbly pool of scallop foam. Adhering to his zero-waste philosophy, chef de Leon utilized every aspect of the scallop, curing the roe, roasting the skirt and the mantle to flavour the glaze and seasoning the entire dish with gratings of scallop bottarga. Tying everything together and bringing colour to the plate was a vibrant kombu and dulce vinaigrette built around deep green seaweed oil. More bubbles were evident in the wine pairing: Benjamin Bridge's 2018 Brut – a luscious, zesty sparkler with an obvious affinity for the umami backed salinity of the dish and a refreshing acidity that set the diner up for the next bite.

Our next presenting chef, Alyssa Dignard, traveled in from the Lone Oak Brewpub in PEI, but drew inspiration from even further afield with her chicken and tiger shrimp tsukune (a type of Japanese meatball). "This is the dish I would make if I had my own izakaya," she explained to the judges. In addition to the orange marmalade glazed tsukune itself chef Dignard had the inspired idea to incorporate crispy chicken skin in her house-made, seaweed inflected furikake seasoning. Most unexpectedly, her creamy dashi, miso and spinach sauce was underpinned by the nutty (both figuratively and flavour-wise) addition of gruyere. Acidity and heat were incorporated through the addition of pickled daikon and a peanut chili oil vinaigrette. In what was several of the judges' favourite pairing of the night, chef Dignard worked in collaboration with the brewmaster at Lone Oak, to create a bright, super dry saison l'acadie with a refreshing, palate cleansing crispness that further cemented the feeling of having been transported to a bustling Tokyo backstreet.

Our third dish of the night, yet another stunning plate, was provided by Phil Petrynko from Black Rabbit. As chef explained, when your restaurant has rabbit in the name, the natural thing is to serve

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carrots: “I think in the past five years we’ve done close to 100 different carrot dishes,” he told us. This iteration saw the humble root vegetable baked in a salt crust and then finely diced, seasoned with ginger and coriander, studded with toasted almonds and pickled golden raisins and topped with a tender ribbon of smoked coffee pork belly. A bright green carrot top tuile garlanded the carrot tartare and a slick of inky black (from the literal inclusion of squid ink) sake and duck fat emulsion brought a saline richness. Local favourites, Magnetic Hill Winery, provided the pairing: a brand-new release created from St. Pepin, a grape virtually synonymous with Quebec, but grown for the first time in Atlantic Canada to great effect. The wine’s floral elements are countered by a structured acidity that, when paired with this superb carrot dish, kept the judges moving from carrot to wine and back again.

Jaswinder Singh from Indian Delhi Bistro was up next, and little did we know, his dish would go on to become our People’s Choice award winner for the night. Chef Singh’s take on butter chicken roulade was a tribute to his hometown of Delhi, where the dish originates from, with updates that reflect the chef’s experience and love of global cuisines. Consequently, in addition to some masterfully steamed basmati rice, there were also two bites of flavour-packed masala mashed potatoes. Similarly, what at first appears to be a classic French roulade surprised with the addition of spicy tandoori marinade flavouring its interior. Magnetic Hill once again provided the pairing, in this case through its bright and fruity rose built from Marquette grapes. The wine’s freshness had enough complexity to match the rich, spiciness of the sauce and the two worked harmoniously together.

Our final dish of the night was prepared by Jordan Holden from Tony’s Bistro who chose rabbit as his featured ingredient, preparing it three ways: roast loin, confit leg and rabbit mousseline. Assembled into a beautifully prepared ballotine, wrapped in house made bacon (to offset the natural leanness of the rabbit) the dish was served with 3 kinds of stone fruit: cherry espuma, compressed plum and apricot gel. A textbook rabbit jus, pellucid and deeply flavourful, along with gently smoked parsnip puree and a pair of parsnip tuiles finished the dish. Technically flawless and a lot of fun to eat, it was the unexpected pairing that ultimately put this dish over the top. Noaska Baker, a fruit wine co-operative based in Clair, New Brunswick, created a deep, dark red wine built entirely from haskap berries, a type of honeysuckle. The fruit’s elongated purple berries offer up a complex juice that, when treated like a traditional red wine complete with oak aging, result in a beverage that drinks more like a rustic pinot noir or fresh Beaujolais. The wine’s crisp acidity and soft leather aromas made for a thrilling pairing and ultimately, after all the scores were tallied, elevated chef Holden to first place on the night.

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With our first winning chef decided our search continues. Tomorrow night we move on to Ottawa – a city that always provide strong competitors – where we will determine our second gold medal winner of the season. Stay tuned!

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