

## Saskatoon Culinary Report 2024

It was a tough year to be a competing chef in Saskatoon, but a great one to be a judge as each one of our seven competing chefs produced dishes that were worthy of a Canadian Culinary Champion.

Things were so wild and so closely contested, in fact, that for the first time ever in Saskatoon the voting for our People's Choice Winner resulted in a tie!

Rather than make the two chefs engage in an bruise showdown or a rocher race, we decided to give the award to both Chef Genalyn Dioso of North Star Restaurant at the Northern Lights Casino and Chef Scott Dicks from Odlá.

Chef Genalyn presented a crossover menu inspired by both her Asian Culinary heritage and SIGA's North American Indigenous Cuisine. On the plate this meant bison tenderloin from sustainably harvested, grain-finished bison cut like a single bite of filet mignon sauced with a luscious wild mushroom & Saskatoon berry demi-glace. paired with Lobster-stuffed Black Rice Croquette with Shaved Black Burgundy Truffle and Sriracha Aioli, on a Three Sisters (corn, bean and squash) puree.

Chef Dicks looked to the Tournedos Rossini – a dish attributed to both Antonin Careme and Auguste Escoffier – for his inspiration, giving the classic French dish named after an Italian composer a distinctly Saskatchewan interpretation. Grilled bison striploin was marinated in chimichurri and served alongside chicken liver mousse with dehydrated and

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pickled Saskatoon berries. focaccia drizzled with camelina oil and garnished with summer savoury, the whole thing brought together with Saskatoon berry and red wine gastrique. Hot and cold, grilled and toasted, rich and tart, chef Dicks found a natural pairing with Rosewood's Looking Glass Red, a blend of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon with a touch of Petite Verdot.

At the same time the audience was voting, we judges were tallying our scores. Joining me in this incredibly competitive year were, Community Chef for CHEP Good Food and the Food Security Coordinator for Metis Nation Saskatchewan, **Moe Mathieu**. Award-winning writer, poet, chef, ex-restaurateur, runner, and chocolate lover, **dee Hobsbawn-Smith**. Executive Chef – The Barn at Wind's Edge and culinary mentor, **Michael Beaulé**.

Thank you also to **Everett Nelson**, Program head for Culinary Arts at Saskatchewan Polytechnic and **Jenn Sharp**, Author of Flat Out Delicious and regular contributor to CBC Saskatchewan and a host of other publications. Finally, I want to give a huge shout out to our Head Judge for Saskatchewan, food writer, Slow Food leader, edgewalker, change maker as well as a great culinary ambassador for the Province **Noelle Chorney**.

One thing we judges noticed is that "Mosaics" are shaping up as the theme of the year. Indeed, we had two chefs in Saskatoon riff on the concept with both Mabel Hill Farm Kitchen & Marketplace chef Michael Brownlee and Hearth Restaurant's Kevin Monych offering them up.

Chef Brownlee utilized alternating morsels of Lake Diefenbaker trout and northern pike to give his dish its stained glass “mosaic” appearance. Providing flavourful accents were pops of trout roe and a sticky sake infused red currant gel. Alongside, a hot-smoked walleye croquette with potato and porcini mushroom rested atop a creamy batch of miso seasoned sweet corn from the restaurant’s own garden. More crunch was realized in the form of fried, seasoned trout skin. Trout demi-glace from heavily roasted trout and chicken bones and a splash of the dish’s pairing wine, Little Engine Union 2021 Red Blend, helped deepen the flavours and justified the unexpected, but ultimately sensible pairing.

Chef Monych’s “mosaic” also utilized Lake Diefenbaker trout, lightly smoked this time, after forming into the desired shape, was rolled in black kale and dusted with foraged samphire ash. His carefully judged and beautifully executed split leek and dill sauce serviced the entire dish, including confit potato, charred trout belly and trout roe, sweet, earthy dots of minted pea puree and a smoked pike brandade finished with crispy trout skin, fried rye cracker shards and pea shoots. Once again, a red wine provided the counter intuitive pairing. Lightning Rock’s 2018 Pinot Noir brought a fun licorice and mace character to the dish, supporting and enhancing the smoked fish and brandade. The mosaic earned chef Monych the bronze medal this evening.

Inspired by a trip to California and an unforgettable meal at chef Thomas Keller’s, Ad Hoc restaurant, chef Tracy Leonhardt from Leopold's Tavern, presented another knockout with her take on one of modern cuisine’s most famous dishes: “Tongue and Cheek.” While chef Keller’s version uses either pork or lamb, chef Leonhardt decided to go in a distinctly Saskatchewan direction by utilizing beef tongue and cheek.

Additionally, she wanted to incorporate the flavours of an old-fashioned cocktail: cherry, bourbon and citrus, going so far as to cure the foie gras in the dish in bourbon. Smoked onion ash and citrus tuile gave a smoky, citrusy kick while a cherry gastrique partnered with a celery root and shallot soubise with a single candied cherry for good measure. Leonhardt went all out with her pairing, offering up Black Hills 2020 Per Se (a name it shares with another Thomas Keller restaurant, incidentally), a vibrant expression of Cabernet Franc.

Cohen's Beer Republic / Picaro Tacos & Cocktails chef Steve Squier drew inspiration for what would become our silver medal winning dish from the time he spent hiking on Vancouver Island this summer and feeling very connected to the land and the sea. On the plate, sable fish loin partnered with a scallop and chanterelle mousse, both wrapped in savoy cabbage then pan roasted. Alongside a salsify puree was piped on to the plate to form a kind of shoreline to hold in the broken fish velouté that chef poured tableside. Crisp salsify skin, tender sea beans, luscious pan roasted beech mushrooms, a parsnip tuile and a dashi espuma garnished the plate thoughtfully.

For his pairing chef went nearly all the way across the country to Prince Edward County where he found the rich orchard fruit flavours and piercing acidity his dish cried out for in Closson Chase's 2021 Brock Chardonnay.

As excellent as all of those dishes were, our gold medal was ultimately awarded to chef Taszia Thakur from Calories Restaurant & Pique Café for her Duck three ways. On the plate, a single slice of duck breast pastrami, redolent with sweet spices and a gentle smokiness draped itself over crisp

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celeriac macédoine. Moving clockwise, diner's encountered An ethereal duck liver crèmeux mille-feuille with the impossibly silky mousse sandwiched between and piped over hand-made puff pastry with a few dots of tangy, fermented blackberry purée to offset the richness. Finally, two bites of duck leg ballotine, wrapped in leek and cooked confit, with a low bush cranberry chutney and spiced duck glaze set the dish up for the pairing: Bench 1775's 2021 Marechal Foch that pulled out all the blackberry and spice from the plate and tempered the slight gaminess of the duck.

With Saskatoon sorted, we've got 7 gold medal winners sorted and the competition for the Canadian Culinary Championship is shaping up to be an all time classic. We're off to Winnipeg next where we'll find who else will be joining this illustrious group.