

St. John's Report 2024

Following a mad Cannonball Run style dash across the country, albeit by airplane and not Lamborghini, I arrived in St. John's with only a few hours before the competition began. It was a long haul, but well worth it as I missed the competition last year owing to a similar scheduling snafu and because we were happy to welcome two new judges to the panel this year: Food and travel writer, cookbook author and recent Taste Canada Cookbook Award winner, Gabby Peyton. GM and Executive chef at Bridie Molloy's and the Celtic Hearth: Brian Piercey.

We were also honoured to have with us six-time James Beard House Guest chef and Culinary Olympian, as well as operations manager at School Lunch Association, Angie Ryan.

Last, but certainly not least, we couldn't have done it without our Head Judge for Newfoundland, Executive Chef at the Cannery, as well as a great culinary ambassador for the Province, Roary Macpherson.

With the judges assembled, the parade of excellent dishes began.

The Little Sparo chef, Zachary Power, showcased his interest in using the whole animal, in this case a delicious Brome Lake Duck. He started by sous vide cooking the duck breast before giving it a final sear in a hot pan for maximum flavour. He arrayed those slices across the plate and placed a single pink and green striped cappellacci (a type of filled pasta whose name translates as "pumpkin hat"), filled with confit duck leg seasoned with concentrated duck jus for kick. A rich duck consommé made

from the bones was turned into caviar pearls and a round of crispy duck skin perched alongside like a barnyard communion wafer. Local blueberries and juniper were combined with balsamic vinegar to create the gastrique that gave the dish some sweet, savory acidity and beautifully offset the intense, spiced plum and dark berry flavours of Petrichor's 2020 Cabernet Merlot.

2023 regional gold medal winner, David Vatcher from Best Coast Restaurant, offered up a sunny plate built around garlic pickle brined chicken breast that he cooked sous vide. The finished protein was rolled in an ash made from onion in garlic skins, wrapped in prosciutto and sliced to create a kind of mosaic, its circular shape echoed by rounds of scallop carpaccio. A miso carrot puree, kale tuile and a classic duck liver mousse supported. The 2022 Wild Rock, a blend of sauvignon blanc and solera perpetual reserve, from Benjamin Bridge allowed the subtleties of the carpaccio to still shine while providing enough body to support the heartier components in the dish.

Grandma's cooking served as inspiration for The Post Taphouse chef Christopher Mercer. He chose to take the classic flavours of his childhood: beef, potato and onions and filter them through the lens of his years of experience as a professional chef. The result was Haricot Farms short rib, braised in his wine pairing, Black Cellar's Whisky Aged Cabernet Shiraz bend, along with a rich beef stock – the braising liquid ultimately becoming the base for a classic Bordelaise laced with red cherries. He prepared the onions in a variety of ways, caramelized, charred and pickled to give variety and then for texture, cubes of bone marrow were breadcrumb coated and fried to crispiness.

Cody Lambe from Blue Smoke BBQ stayed true to his restaurant's philosophy and offered up his signature Blue Smoke BBQ smoked pork belly with chicharon, onion & leek soubise. Anchoring this hearty treat was a six-week aged, house-made, Fresno sriracha that carefully balanced sweet and spicy. Crunchy totopos triangles, a drizzle of smoky ash oil, sharp pickled shallots and even a few hexagons of local honeycomb provided complexity and interest. The dish with all its bold character required a powerhouse of a wine and Henry of Pelham's baco noir, with its blackberry and currant flavours, made for a pairing strong enough to bring home the bronze.

Lacey Coffin of Vu Resto and Bar had the kind of childhood in Newfoundland where her dad would go out beyond the back yard, dive into the ocean and come up with a few scallops for dinner. That memory inspired her dish: Seared Canadian Scallops with Sweet and Spicy Pork Belly, Roasted Corn Puree and Chile Oil.

Following directly in her mother's footsteps, Coffin seared the plump fresh scallops in pork fat, but instead of canned corn, she made her own sweet corn puree, enlivening it with a dash of smoky chili oil. More chili, as well as cinnamon and ginger, soy and honey, seasoned the luscious slab of belly and the whole dish was tied together by the fresh apple and orchid aromas of Pelee Island's 2017 Riesling. The dish earned Coffin the silver medal.

Last year's silver medal winner, The Merchant Tavern's Nick Walters was back, and this year cracked the code to come up with our Gold Medal dish for the night. What an absolute beauty she was, too: Bluefin Tuna with foie gras custard, ponzu tapioca and cardamom. Chef Walters started out by

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marinating the tuna in ponzu, serrano and green onion, making it reminiscent of a refined Hawaiian poke. This sat atop a luscious spread of Quebec foie gras cremeaux, that brought umami and a welcome creamy richness.

A local partridge berry compote offered acidity with two textural elements, a savoury soy infused sesame brittle and a striking squid ink tuile in the uncanny shape of a fish skeleton. Equally crisp was the 2021 Lightfoot & Wolfville Brut Rose pairing. The wine, a light, refreshing blend of pinot noir and pinot meunier from the Annapolis Valley seemed to melt alongside the foie gras and celebrate the berry elements of the compote.

Everyone at the CCC is in for a treat if chef Walters decides to recreate this dish at the finale.