

Vancouver Culinary Report 2024

To Vancouver's North Shore for our venue for this year with its spectacular view across the harbour to the sparkling skyline beyond. With this stunning backdrop as inspiration, the chefs and guests gathered for what would be one of the most closely contested competitions of the season so far.

Joining me at the judge's table to help distinguish the superb from the merely excellent were Chef Andrea Carlson of Burdcock & Co, our newest Michelin star awarded judge, as well as VCC International Culinary Arts instructor and 2004 and 2008 Culinary Olympics Gold medalist, Hamid Salimian. We were happy to welcome back Executive Chef at Boulevard Kitchen & Oyster Bar and the 2020 Canadian Culinary Champion, Roger Ma.

Also joining us this year were two new judges, Chef and Co-Owner of Vij's and Rangoli restaurant's, Meeru Dhalwala and our returning VIP chef, 2023's Vancouver Gold Medalist and the current National Culinary Champion, from Wild Blue Restaurant in Whistler, Jasper Cruikshank. Of course, our wonderful head judge for Vancouver, award-winning cookbook author, food writer and entrepreneur, Joie Alvaro Kent, brought her usual enthusiasm and expertise to the table.

The competition started out strong with Casa Molina chef Elea Blasco's preparation of torched wild eel with her take on ajo blanco (a kind of nut-

based gazpacho). The squares of eel balanced atop the thick soup sported delicate, lacy tuiles seasoned and dyed black by squid ink. A warm, luscious eel and pine nut suquet (a type of Catalan fish stew) the colour of tanned leather was poured around the elevated components while a splash of parsley oil added colour and fresh herbaceousness. Equally refreshing was chef Blasco's choice of Pamplemousse Jus, Traditional Method 2022 Chardonnay as her vibrant pairing.

We fortunate judges got a second taste of sparkling wine, Bella Estate's Traditional Brut, as chef Jonah Joffe from Bar Bravo chose that clean and subtle wine to complement his delicate, bright dish. Anchoring the plate was a Cascade steelhead and smoked sablefish mi cuit, forming a kind of mosaic with the colourful fish bordered with veins of Pacific dulse. A wee cap of warm, horseradish foam topped the fish. Salt roasted beets were turned into a fluid gel and piped around the plate while a gorgeous red fermented borscht consommé tied the whole dish together beautifully. Indeed, chef Joffe's efforts would earn him the bronze medal when all the scores were tallied.

Alex Kim, from Five Sails Restaurant, prepared a BC Seafood Nose to Tail dish inspired by the flavours from his childhood in South Korea and it is among the finest, most accomplished dishes I've ever encountered at any competition and would ultimately, bring home the gold.

He presented the dish as three distinct elements. Eomuk (fish cake) saw sablefish loin paired with Cortes Island scallop mousseline prepared as a seafood terrine and served with fermented apple-citrus emulsion. Wrapped

around it, in a technically stunning feat, was a lacy black veil of roasted sablefish skin.

Beside that, chef offered a Mandu (dumpling) filled with poached side stripe shrimp and Dungeness crab with Okanagan apple salad. The supple skin, glazed with a consommé gelee made from the heads, bones and tails of sablefish and shellfish stock was superbly well-judged.

The final element was a take on traditional Ssam (lettuce wrap) consisting of seared sablefish belly and Kisu oysters flavoured with doenjang (Korean soybean paste). In place of the lettuce was a trompe l'oeil sea lettuce tart shaped like an oyster shell. Green shiso, pear and citrus soy pearls accompanied. Once again, we judges enjoyed another glass of sparkling wine, Tinhorn Creek's Blanc de Blanc whose autolytic aromas highlighted the delicate citrus and green apple elements in the dish while the wine's fresh acidity supported the more vibrant flavours.

The chef that came closest to surpassing Kim's powerhouse of a dish was Bo Li from The Fish Man. His dish, Golden Soup with Lingcod Cheek, was another knockout and showed phenomenal technique to, when all was said and done, claim silver.

At its most basic, the dish consisted of BC lingcod cheek served in a soup that included Dungeness crab, bamboo fungus, luffa melon and geoduck.

What made it so deeply satisfying, however, were the way the textures played off one another from the delicate, airy crunch of the bamboo fungus to the more esoteric charms of the luffa melon. The whole thing supported by a masterful broth flavoured with dried scallops, pickled mustard, ginger and chives, that grew more delicious and revealing with each spoonful. Unsworth Vineyard's 2022 chardonnay from the Cowichan valley, was the superb pairing, the weight of the wine echoing the rich broth and tender lingcod while a slight ginger aroma in the glass flowed naturally into the dish.

Ricardo Valverde of SUYO modern Peruvian, considers white sturgeon "the pork of the sea" and, therefore, chose to treat the fish loin like a pork loin, first brining, the cooking it sous-vide before searing and serving it alongside a carrot milhojas, a kind of savoury mille-feuille. A stately chorizo vinaigrette once again eschewed pork and utilized alpaca in the sausage. Topping the whole thing off was a voluminous, ethereal and beautifully seasoned sturgeon skin "chicharon," that was as fun to eat as it was delicious. Chef Valverde continued to surprise when it came time to pair the dish, offering up a cocktail built around Paramo unruly gin with acidified parsnips, bee pollen, burdock root and egg white.

Bacaro Restaurant's Chanthy Yen created a dish that was informed by BC's rich Chinese food tradition as seen through the lens of the chef's own Cambodian heritage. On the plate this meant three elements. A sea urchin and pear mooncake that saw a custard of sea urchin laced with brown butter encased in a dough dyed black from activated charcoal. Beside that clever parcel was his BC salmon mosaic, the fish dusted with roasted rice,

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caramelized lemongrass and fresh turmeric, the whole thing topped by a layer of Kroeungm, a silky and flavourful Cambodian curry paste.

Finally, wild spot prawn toast with Makrut lime. To raise this otherwise humble component to competition status, chef transformed the shrimp into a light sausage, seasoned with galangal and makrut lime. He also used the shells to create a bisque that would form the basis for the caviar pearls that gave the toast added texture. There were a lot of flavours going on with that plate, but Ursa Major Wines' Chapter 6; A Congregation of Jackals, 2023 Gewurtztraminer managed to dodge and weave its way among the myriad flavours like a cat burglar bypassing a laser trap.

With the scores tallied, but even before the awards were announced, I raced to the airport to catch the red-eye to Toronto for an onward connection to St. John's to judge that competition a few hours later. Stay tuned!