

Canadian Culinary Championship 2025 Finale

By Chris Johns, National Culinary Advisor

Ten of the country's finest chefs gathered in Ottawa earlier this month for what will surely be remembered as one of the most hard-fought and closely contested Canadian Culinary Championships of all time. It would take the combined scores from three challenging contests across two days to determine the year's winners, and when it was all over, three chefs would take the podium, with one chef taking home the title.

As tradition dictates, day one began with the mystery wine event. National Wine Advisor, David Lawrason chose a gorgeous, full-bodied aromatic white redolent with aromas of tangerine and apricot that put many people in mind of Sauvignon Blanc or Pinot Gris. In fact, we would later discover, it was 100% Semillon from a brand-new Niagara-on-the-Lake winery, MW Cellars.

The wine spurred on our chefs and inspired them to create some outstanding dishes. The judges were especially impressed with Winnipeg's chef Austin Granados, from Cake-Ology in that city, who utilized his skills as a pastry chef for a daring and clever peach and scallop millefeuille with a citrus reduction and compressed peaches that managed to temper its sweetness enough to bring out the honey and passion fruit characteristics in the wine. Ryan Lister from the Dorset in Toronto also went with scallops and prepared an outstanding, light, tender and deeply flavourful scallop and cod sausage with a lemongrass, wine and cucumber cream sauce. It was an exceptionally well-executed dish and a harmonious pairing.

Winning the people's choice award on the evening was hometown chef, Lizardo Beccera from Raphael Peruvian Cuisine for his beet-cured Hokaido scallop crudo with citrus Grana Padano foam, spiced cucumber, charred Brazil nuts and lemongrass seasoned plantain.

The next morning, we gathered at La Cite College for the always thrilling and sometimes intimidating, black box competition. This year's box housed seven ingredients gathered, like the chefs and judges, from across Canada.

Lardo, luscious, cured pork fat, from Aliments Viens in Montreal. Merasheen Bay Oysters from Canada's coldest oyster-growing region in Newfoundland. Organic, non-GMO artisanal popping corn from Highwood Crossing in Alberta. Outstanding, knobbly celeriac from Ottawa Organics.

Heartee Foods, also in Ottawa, provided a selection of hyper-local mushrooms that included oyster mushrooms, chestnut mushrooms and black pearl mushrooms. Fabiola Della Pria from Unique Brazilian Dairy in Manitoba provided us with some of her award-winning, Minas Frescal, cheese while from the Pacific Ocean, we acquired fresh sea urchin roe.

With the box unveiled, chefs were tasked with creating two dishes that, in some form or another, utilized all seven ingredients between them. The ingredients inspired some outstanding cooking from our chefs and resulted in some very happy and well-fed judges.

There were some concerns that all the seafood ingredients might disadvantage some of the chefs from central Canada and the prairies, but in fact, those chefs created some of the very best dishes of the day.

For example, Riverview Restaurant Glenora Park chef Doreen Prei from Edmonton, knocked it out of the park with her dishes: raw oysters with uni vinaigrette and lardo cooked popcorn as well as roasted mushrooms with crispy cheese and a celeriac and lard puree, roasted mushrooms with crispy cheese.

Saskatoon's own Tazia Thakur from Calories Restaurant and Pique Café similarly impressed the judges with her jalapeño sofrito filled corn crepe with uni emulsion, pickled pan roasted mushrooms and tempura oyster mushroom as well as her delicate celeriac puree with lardo melted leeks, herb chimichurri and fried cheese.

Calgary chef, Matthias Fong from Primary Colours, also rose to the occasion preparing a clever mushroom carpaccio with celery root paneer, popcorn oyster tonnato and pickled urchin. His sesame fried dumpling with a celery popcorn brandade, pickled celery root and a lardo mushroom puree was another standout.

As soon as the black box wrapped up, our chefs made their way directly to the Shaw Center to start preparing for the Grand Finale where they would serve versions of the dishes they won their regional competitions with. For many this is the highlight of the weekend and, as the only person in attendance who had tasted all 10 dishes earlier in the year, I was excited to see what my fellow judges would think of the incredible dishes they were about to experience.

I was especially impressed with how each of the chefs had used the weeks and months since their regional wins to make slight alterations and improve on what were already outstanding plates.

Indeed, one judge admitted to me afterwards that one of the dishes was so incredible it nearly brought him to tears.

He was speaking specifically of chef Nicholas Walters from Merchant's Tavern in St. John's who offered up a brilliant and unexpected powerhouse of a dish: Newfoundland bluefin tuna tartare with a foie gras cremeux, partridge berry lime compote, green onion, sesame brittle and a squid ink tuile in the shape of a fish skeleton. The combination of lean tuna with the rich, foie gras and the expertly balanced acid components made for a thrilling combination.

Ultimately, however, what determined our winners wasn't the grand finale, but rather an ability to maintain consistently high scores throughout each of the three competitions.

Consequently, our bronze medal went to the much lauded and extraordinarily talented chef from Restaurant Tanière³ in Quebec City, chef François-Emmanuel Nicol. His Cod Mousseline Between Pan Seared Bread at Mystery Wine was a knockout. He stayed strong through Black Box with oysters fried in tempura with sea urchin sauce and shaved lardo. While his grand finale dish: picanha of beef served with preserved memories of Canadian summer was enough to earn him a place on the podium.

Taking home silver, representing Atelier Tony in Moncton, was chef Jordan Holden. From his mi cuit salmon with dill cream and cucumber yogurt at Mystery wine to the phenomenal sauce work that anchored his magnificent grand final dish: rabbit ballotine with stone fruit and rabbit liver tartlet, chef Holden more than held his own.

The one chef, however, who maintained focus, intensity and consistency throughout the competition more fiercely than any other was Alex Kim from Five Sails Restaurant in Vancouver. His winter squash and goat cheese rotolo at Mystery Wine was outstanding. At Black Box, he blew minds with poached oysters and uni, a popcorn beurre blanc, lardo tuile, wild mushroom ragout, with different textures of celeriac, and Parisienne gnocchi. His grand finale dish, however, stands as one of the finest, most accomplished dishes I've ever had the privilege of tasting at this competition.

A trio of complex expertly executed components, the plate included a Wild sablefish and Cortes Island scallop terrine, a plump sidestriped shrimp mandu with Dungeness crab and apple, and a magnificent Kusshi oyster on a sea lettuce tartlet with Pemberton salsify and 6 months fermented

Doenjang. It was a plate that balanced ambition, with finesse while each component added to the narrative to build a compelling culinary story.

Chef Kim, in addition to holding the title of Canadian Culinary Champion for 2025, takes home a bounty of prizes from our sponsors Knifewear including an exquisite Haruyuki Zanpa Sujihiki 240mm knife from Knifewear and a once-in-a-lifetime trip for two to Peru with flights provided by Direct Travel and VIP access to some of the best restaurants in the world.

My thanks to all of the chefs, judges, guests and volunteers who helped make this year's Canadian Culinary Championship such an enormous success. 2026 is going to have to bring something special to compete with the quality and talent we saw this year, but I have complete confidence in Canada's culinary talent that we are in for another banner year. See you there!