



**REGIONAL QUALIFIER FOR THE CANADIAN
CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP**

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Saskatoon Report 2025

Our last, but indisputably not least, stop on our Cross-Canada search for the 10 chefs who will vie for the Canadian Culinary Championship at the end of January wrapped up at Prairieland Park in Saskatoon. The chefs of the Bridge City pulled out all the stops to knock the socks off the guests and the judges, treating us all to a night of culinary showmanship as good as we've ever seen from the city.

Our judging panel had the delightful—but never simple—task of selecting this year's winners. Thank you to: dee Hobsbawn-Smith – Award-winning writer, poet, chef, and lifelong culinary creative. Michael Beulé – Executive Chef at The Barn at Wind's Edge, mentor, and passionate traveler. Chris Hill – Accomplished culinary competitor and Director of Operations at Dakota Dunes Resort. Anthony McCarthy – Saskatchewan Polytechnic instructor and former medalist, who generously stepped in last minute. Noelle Chorney – Our head judge, respected food writer and Slow Food advocate, whose leadership brought this exceptional group together. We were also honoured to welcome our VIP guest chef judge, Chef Taszia Thakur, Saskatoon's 2025 Gold Medalist from Calories Restaurant.

Our first dish of the night set the tone: Chef John Costanzi's Pacific Raised Scallop Cannelloni began with freshly made sepia-infused pasta, its deep black hue contrasting with the pale scallop mousse inside—passed through a fine sieve three times to achieve a cloud-light texture. Braised leeks cooked slowly in vermouth and oaked gin provided a fragrant sweetness, connecting land to sea. Beneath it all, a smoky celeriac purée acted as a soft, grounding note. The bisque, reduced brought a decadent richness showing respect for traditional technique. A final drizzle of fennel oil produced a natural separation that added beauty as well as brightness. Paired with the crisp acidity of Quarry Rock Riesling, the dish offered harmony and lift.

Chef Genalyn Dioso offered one of the evening's most evocative presentations with her *Pâté de Nations*. A delicate pastry enriched with wagyu-beef tallow, held a trio of wild meats: bison, elk, and goose foie gras. A sweetgrass-juniper aspic sealed the terrine, uniting its elements skillfully. Onion ash provided a smoky, elemental backdrop, offset by mustard foam, mustard seed "caviar," and pickled rainbow carrots. A maple leaf tuile crowned the plate with symbolism and crispness. Paired with Nk'Mip Pinot Noir, the dish unfolded like edible cartography—one land, many voices, expressed in harmony.

Chef Tracy Leonhardt interpreted comforting prairie flavours in a sophisticated way with her braised pressed pork belly. The meat—slow-cooked, pressed, and finished with a thin shard of crisp



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crackling was contrasted with an ethereal corn espuma, its sweetness and airiness balancing the belly's depth. The centrepiece of the plate, a wild mushroom duxelles encased in a tender Savoy cabbage sphere, grounded the dish with earthiness. Tart cherry dust supplied brightness, while vibrant piccalilli relish added acidity, spice, and a nostalgic nod to pantry traditions. A glossy pan jus tied each component together, supported by fresh, colourful herb oil and microgreens. Grey Monk's 2023 Pinot Noir, supported the cherry and spice elements of the dish while offering enough body to tame the belly's richness.

Blending spice, smoke, and prairie ingredients, Chef Chaminda Ambagaspitiye's dish traced an arc between Sri Lanka and Canada. His beautifully cooked lamb loin, smoked gently over cinnamon wood was cooked sous-vide before roasting. A crust of curry leaf, cashews, and pistachios added texture while his reinvention of watalappam—a traditionally sweet custard—into a savoury, gently spicy version infused with cardamom and green chili stood out as both bold and elegant. Pomegranate ganache introduced tart fruitiness; saffron-infused kokis added crisp lightness; and mint pearls provided cooling relief between bites. The pairing, Cave Spring's 2023 Pinot Noir, mirrored the plate's interplay of spice and freshness with red-fruit clarity and mineral structure.

Chef Scott Dicks' bronze-winning plate demonstrated how deeply Odlá's philosophy of locality and seasonality informs his cooking. His chokecherry and black-garlic braised short rib was tender, aromatic, and intensely regional, showcasing Saskatchewan's late-season flavours with confidence. Alongside it, tortelli made with Saskatchewan-milled semolina held a filling of short-rib trimmings, house-made ricotta, and rehydrated morels. A celery stalk and leaf salsa verde brought fresh, herbal lift, while toasted hazelnuts added crunch. His preserved black-truffle-and-morel "caviar" delivered depth and a touch of forest floor that paired expertly with Night Moves Gamay Noir.

Our silver-medal winner: Riverside Country Club's Chef Shaun McConnell paid homage to prairie landscapes and food traditions with his seared Brome Lake duck breast. The bird's ruby-red flesh, crisped fat, showed great technique while his confit duck croquette added richness and texture. Earthy beluga lentils and smooth sunchoke purée grounded the dish, creating a base that complemented the duck's depth. Pickled chanterelles brought brightness and forest acidity, counterbalancing the richness. The sour cherry demi-glace—infused with cocoa and Pinot Noir—was a standout. Closson Chase Churchside Pinot Noir amplified the dish's nuance with fruit-driven acidity and subtle earthy notes.

Taking home the gold on the evening was Chef Kevin Monych. His Saddle of Rabbit proudly displayed Hearth Restaurant's commitment to thoughtful sourcing, quiet elegance, and the belief that prairie cuisine can be both humble and elevated. The bacon-wrapped rabbit saddle—stuffed with garlic- and thyme-infused pork sausage, smoked rabbit, and prunes—was roasted to a tenderness that



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allowed sweetness, smokiness, and savouriness in the dish to harmonize. Its accompaniments: spiraled celeriac and parsnip cooked fondant-style, fermented plum for acidity, and a glossy black-apple reduction bound the flavours together. Paired with Rosewood Estates' Blau, whose berries, spice, and bright acidity echoed and lifted the rabbit's nuances, the dish stood out even in a competition as fierce as this.

Thank you to all of the chefs across the country who outdid themselves and made for an exceptional year. The Canadian Culinary Championship is only a couple of months away at the time of this writing and it's sure to be a great one!