



REGIONAL QUALIFIER FOR THE CANADIAN
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Toronto Culinary Report 2025

It was an electrifying mix of heavy-hitters, both veterans and first timers, who gathered at the Carlu for this year's Toronto regional qualifier for the 2025 Canadian Culinary Championship.

Tasked with judging the competition was an exceptional group of talent representing culinary leadership, critical expertise, and deep regional knowledge. The panel included James Chatto, writer, critic, and founding National Culinary Advisor of Canada's Great Kitchen Party; John Higgins, mentor and educator renowned for his leadership at George Brown College; Chef David Wolfman, celebrated First Nations chef, educator, and television host; and Nancy Matsumoto, James Beard Award-winning author and editor. Rounding out the group were Chef Frank Parhizgar, owner of FK and 2023 Toronto Gold Medalist, and our esteemed head judge, Renée Suen — restaurant and travel journalist, photographer, and Mid-Canada Chair for *The World's 50 Best Restaurants*.

Adding insight from the competition floor was Chef Ryan Lister, 2025 Toronto Gold Medalist from The Dorset, who joined as this year's VIP guest chef judge.

Highlights of the evening include Chef Moeen Abzaid of *Arbequina Restaurant*, whose dish, *Slow-Cooked Local Short Ribs with Tamarind and Date Glaze*, paid homage to his Jordanian roots. Boneless ribs, gently braised in aromatic broth and finished over the grill, were elevated by a glossy tamarind-date molasses sauce infused with cumin and chili. Paired with silky eggplant ganoush, grilled Napa cabbage, watercress, and candied hazelnuts spiced with shawarma flavours, the plate balanced richness and brightness beautifully. A dry yet floral *Copenhagen Sparkling Tea Lyserød* — made with Oolong and Silver Needle teas — provided an intriguing complement, its red-berry lift echoing the sweet-and-sour notes of the glaze.

Chef Davide Ciavattella of *Don Alfonso 1890* offered one of the most poetic plates of the night. His *Marinated Pork Belly with Smoked Zucca Lunga di Napoli, Licorice, and Cranberry* traced a dialogue between his Italian heritage and Canadian life. Apple cider and maple syrup brought orchard sweetness and northern light, while the smoked Italian pumpkin grounded the dish in memory. *Cave Spring 2023 Riesling* from Niagara's Adam Steps vineyard echoed its interplay of acidity and depth, bringing clarity to each bite.

First time competitor, from *Ten Restaurant*, Chef Julian Bentivegna presented a striking vegetarian course centered on the humble daikon. His *Smoked Daikon with Preserved Plums and Chestnut Brown Butter* layered textures and temperatures: daikon marinated for seven days in a mirin and soy



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cure, then smoked overnight with applewood and sliced thin to layer with raw daikon and tangy preserved plums. Finished with brown butter, chestnut, and coriander, the result was a minimalist meditation on balance and restraint. Paired with *Tinhorn Creek 2023 Pinot Gris* from the Okanagan Valley, the wine's mineral and herbal tones mirrored the dish's quiet complexity.

Fellow first time competitor, from the excellent Contrada Restaurant, chef Mike Vieira celebrated sustainability and simplicity with his *Dry-Aged Nova Scotia Swordfish Crudo with Oyster Cream and Fermented Sea Beans*. Line-caught through Affinity Fish's sustainable program, the swordfish was lightly cured, thinly sliced, and complemented by a coastal palette of buttermilk, smoked chili oil, and bright herb oil. Paired with *Big Head Wines 2023 RAW Chenin Blanc*, its freshness and minerality underscored the dish's oceanic purity.

The evening's crowd favourite came courtesy of **Chef Arnaud Bloquel** of *Restaurant Lucie*, who won the **People's Choice Award** for his exuberant, cross-cultural dish *Nova Scotia Lobster with Coffee Papagayo Bisque and Plantain Gnocchi*. Bloquel's French training and Caribbean background shone through in a plate that united Canadian seafood, tropical produce, and classical technique. The coffee-infused bisque cream played against a sweet-pepper vegetarian sauce, while golden plantain gnocchi added a touch of island nostalgia. The pairing — *Domaine Le Clos Jordanne 2022 Chardonnay* from Jordan Village — amplified both warmth and precision: its nutty oak complemented the coffee tones, while bright acidity refreshed the palate.

Bronze went to Chef Johnson Wu of *Islington Golf Club* for his technically accomplished *BC Steelhead Trout with Umeboshi and Miso Brown Butter*. The dish reflected a deeply personal journey and a celebration of Asian flavours. The trout, cured in soy dashi and lightly torched, was paired with a soy-mushroom espuma, pickled onion, ginger-scallion oil, and sweet honey melon. Together, these elements formed a composition of richness and contrast — smoky, tangy, and gently sweet all tied together with striking notes of acidity. The *Stonebridge 2021 Brut Rosé* from Niagara-on-the-Lake provided an elegant bridge, its fine bubbles cutting through richness while its citrus and berry notes lifted the dish's delicate layers. It was a refined, heartfelt performance from a chef whose understanding of balance and seasoning showed in every bite.

Silver went to Chef Adam Ryan of *Azura*, whose *Short Rib Tagine* fused Mediterranean, Moroccan, and Canadian influences in one ambitious, cohesive narrative. Braised with saffron, sumac, pine, and chermoula, the short rib embodied fragrance and power, anchored by a Sardinian-style stuffed culurgione filled with turmeric and ginger potato and tossed in a fermented Ontario tomato ragù. A kimchi-inspired relish of bitter radicchio, quince, and harissa added acidity and funk, while a za'atar-



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crusted cannoli filled with orange blossom labneh provided a bright, surprising finish. Paired with *Hidden Bench Estate 2023 Pinot Noir*, the wine's forest floor and red-fruit profile mirrored the dish's spice and herbal depth. Chef Ryan's plate was storytelling through flavour — complex yet cohesive, rooted in technique and imagination.

Gold, however, belonged to Chef Jonathan Williams of *Park Hyatt Toronto*, whose *Pastrami Short Rib with Carrot, Horseradish, and Rye* was a masterclass in precision and restraint. The beef short rib, brined in coffee shio koji, coriander, and black pepper before being smoked, offered deep, resonant savouriness. A carrot, prepared through multiple transformations — juiced, dehydrated, rehydrated, and glazed with Minus 8 Icewine vinegar — showcased both discipline and creativity. A rye-carrot tuile added crunch, while onion-horseradish fluid gel and smoked beef fat brought layers of richness and lift. The *Leaning Post 2020 Syrah* from Stony Creek, ON, with its peppery, leathery profile, met the dish's smoky power note for note. It was a dish that combined intellect and emotion — technical rigour with genuine warmth — and one that perfectly encapsulated the spirit of the evening.

2025 competition was a reminder of what makes this city's culinary scene exceptional: diversity of influence, technical prowess, and the courage to reinterpret tradition. The judges faced the enviable challenge of choosing between dishes that told deeply personal stories while maintaining impeccable standards of flavour and presentation.