



REGIONAL QUALIFIER FOR THE CANADIAN
CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP

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Vancouver Report 2025

An enthusiastic and generous crowd were up and tripping the light fantastic in Vancouver last week. Their enthusiasm buoyed, no doubt, because Vancouver is coming off back-to-back wins at the CCC and, if the dishes on offer at this year's regional qualifier were any indication, they city is aiming for a threepeat. Our judging panel reflected Vancouver's own culinary diversity and depth, drawing from across the city's restaurant, media, and wine worlds. Chef Andrea Carlson: owner of the One Michelin-star Burdock & Co., Michelin Guide-recommended Bar Gobo, and Harvest Community Foods. 2023 Canadian Culinary Champion and now executive chef at L'Abattoir, Jasper Cruikshank. Meeru Dhalwala: Co-founder of Vij's, Co-founder/Executive Chef of Lila Restaurant, award-winning cookbook author, 2024 recipient of Restaurants Canada Award for Culinary Excellence. Roger Ma Executive Chef at Michelin Guide-recommended Boulevard Kitchen & Oyster Bar and the 2020 Canadian Culinary Champion. Scott Jaeger - Chef, Mentor, Canadian Bocuse d'Or Candidate 2007. Culinary Olympics Gold medallist 2008 and 2016. An especially heartfelt thank you to Vancouver Head Judge, she's an Award-winning cookbook author, food writer, Co-founder of Indáy Filipino Chef Exchange: Joie Alvaro Kent! We were also honoured to have 2025 Vancouver Gold Medalist and current Canadian Culinary Champion Chef Alex Kim, from Five Sails Restaurant: joining us as our VIP guest chef judge.

The first dish to arrive set a tone of ambition. **Chef Balavant Ajagaonkar** of *Desi Indian Lounge* presented a masterclass in cross-cultural storytelling with his *Solkadi-Glazed Side Stripe Shrimp Mousse*. His bronze-winning plate brought together the flavours of India's west coast and the ingredients of Canada's West Coast, tied together with French and Italian technique. At its core: a shrimp mousse enriched with ginger, garlic, coriander, and Malvani spices, then glazed in the tangy, pink coconut-kokam sauce of solkadi — a tribute to his mother's shrimp curry and his father's fishing days. Surrounding it, layers of neer dosa cake and grape chutney, shrimp crumble, and a savoury dill panna cotta atop crispy chakali made for a thoughtful,



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intricate composition. His pairing, *Unsworth Vineyards Charme de L'Ile*, brought bright citrus and mineral notes that elevated the spice and oceanic freshness of the dish.

If Ajagaonkar's approach was about the marriage of tradition and migration, **Chef Robert Lee of Glowbal** offered a meditation on balance. His *Haida Gwaii Sablefish Roulade with Pacific Scallop and Squid Mousse* paid homage to the ancient Chinese philosophical concept of yin and yang, where richness met acidity and texture met tenderness. Wrapped in bean curd and served with tofu purée and smoked clam cream, the sablefish referenced childhood memories of his Taiwanese grandfather's steamed cod. A second component — yuba pastry filled with octopus and jellyfish salad — added crunch and nostalgia, seasoned with his grandfather's own shacha marinade. Each element on the plate was connected by soy: fresh bean curd, tofu, soy milk, and yuba sheets, bringing cohesion to the plate. The bright, slightly sweet *Baptism by Firetruck Cider* offered a refreshing, crisp finish, its effervescence designed to echo Vancouver's coastal air.

First time competitor, Chef María Ponce of Chopito Restaurant, delivered one of the evening's most evocative dishes — a mosaic of sablefish, salmon, and leek wrapped in Swiss chard, served with shrimp pâté foam, fermented kumquat, and a pork-beef-shrimp jus. Ponce's story began in the deserts of Sonora and led to Canada's Pacific coast, and her plate expressed that journey through contrast: ocean and land, memory and innovation. The fermented kumquat evoked her family's backyard in Mexico, while parsnip purée and lemon brought gentle sweetness and brightness. Her low-waste philosophy — reusing lemon peels in the paired *Anthony Buchanan Chardonnay aromatized wine* — made her dish as thoughtful as it was delicious. It was a powerful reminder that sustainability and storytelling are not mutually exclusive.

Chef Luke Boswell of Bar Corso offered the most nostalgic plate of the night: *BC Black Cod with Parmesan & Chicken Consommé, Fermented Endive, Pine Mushrooms, and Irish Soda Loaf*. Inspired by the last meal he cooked for his great-grandmother, Boswell's dish reinterpreted Anglo-Indian flavours through refined



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technique. Curry-cured black cod was gently cooked by a pour-over of hot consommé, the broth thickening as it met chicken mousse — a theatrical flourish that released the luscious aroma of the pine mushrooms. Paired with *Terravista Vineyards “Figaro” 2024*, the dish embodied memory and warmth, a simple story told beautifully.

But it was **Chef Jaeyoung Park of Boulevard Kitchen and Oyster Bar** who ultimately captured the judges’ hearts — and the gold medal — with his *Degustation of Wingtat Canada Chicken*. Park’s approach was both philosophical and technical, rooted in the Korean concept of the “circle of life,” symbolized through the circular motifs in his plating. His tasting of chicken showcased every part of the bird: a poulet pressé of braised thigh and five-spice breast, a gochujang-glazed chicken heart grilled over binchotan charcoal, and a crispy tartlet of chicken liver mousse with quince jam. A smoked egg yolk ring and chicken jus infused with thyme, garlic, and Madeira tied the dish together. Each bite precise, warm, and suggesting a deep respect for tradition. The pairing, *Tantalus 2023 Chardonnay*, provided just the right acidity and oak to balance the richness — a flawless complement to a deeply meaningful dish.

Finally, **Chef TJ Conwi of Ono Restaurant** closed the evening with a dish that captured Vancouver’s community spirit. His *Oxtail Kare-Kare with Spot Prawn Bagoong* reimagined the Filipino classic through the lens of sustainability and compassion. Cooked for 36 hours and shaped into rillettes, the oxtail was topped with garlic-peanut chicharrón and served alongside bagoong fermented from local prawn shells. Conwi replaced traditional rice with a rice-thickened soubise, showing ingenuity and technical skill. Every component told the story of his dual commitment to culinary excellence and social impact — from surplus herb oil to recovered eggplant pickle. His pairing, a *Calamansi Pale Pilsner from La Cerveceria Astilleros*, was inspired by the Philippines’ iconic San Miguel beer, brightened with calamansi citrus and nostalgia.

Vancouver marks the halfway point in our national journey with St. John’s, Montreal, Calgary, Toronto and Saskatoon still to come and with designs on stopping Vancouver’s quest for a third title.



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