



**REGIONAL QUALIFIER FOR THE CANADIAN
CULINARY CHAMPIONSHIP**

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Winnipeg Report 2025

If the chefs in competition this year are any indication, Winnipeg's food scene is thriving with talent. A packed house filled the RBC Convention Centre and guests were treated to some of the most accomplished and impressive dishes I've seen from the city in my 3 years visiting for this competition.

It is a good problem to have when nearly every dish on offer looked and tasted like it could compete on the national stage. The task of sorting out the amazing from the merely excellent fell to an outstanding bench of judges featuring some of the finest palates in the city. Joining me this year were AV Kitching, arts and life writer at the Free Press, Jesse Friesen, 2-time CGKP gold medalist and Executive Chef at Academy Hospitality as well as Christa Bruneau-Guenther Executive Chef of Feast Cafe Bistro. Also joining us, all the way from his newly adopted hometown of Vancouver, was 2024 Winnipeg Gold Medalist and our special guest chef, Austin Granados.

An especially big thank you to Winnipeg head judge, Peg City Grub editor and MasterChef top 5 finalist, Mike Green, who so expertly stepped in for me and explained to our VIP guests the ins and outs of the judging process when my flight was delayed.

Our work began in earnest with the arrival of our first dish, a fanciful and literal painting on a plate. If Bob Ross had been a chef instead of a painter, he might well have come up with a happy little dish like the one we saw from Ken Hoang of Le Colonial. An enormous red and white, lighthouse settled into a "beach" of peanut butter and sesame seeds kept watch over the dish, while a mayonnaise sea lapped at the shoreline. The mis-en-scene was ultimately a showcase for a flavourful and herbaceous cuttlefish salad (served in a Belgian endive sailboat, natch), a crisp and luscious pork and shrimp spring roll and tender shrimp, whipped into a frothy paste,



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wrapped around sugar cane and then deep fried. La Frenz 2023 Reserve Chardonnay from the Naramata Bench – served, mundanely, in a wine glass and not an abandoned hermit crab shell – made for a bright and clever pairing.

Gather Craft Kitchen and Bar's Michael de Groot took a very unexpected turn with his wine pairing, when he chose to pair Colaneri Estate Winery's, Sempre, a sparkling wine, to match his dish of braised pork cheek with popcorn polenta, peach glazed carrots and chorizo buttermilk cream. Normally such a dish, slow braised and richly flavoured, would want a heartier red, but the sweetness of the carrots, as well as the creaminess of the polenta and the richness of the cheek allowed the dish and wine to work in compelling harmony.

Chinnie Ramos from Wow Catering Duo reinterpreted sisig, a traditional Filipino soup typically made with pork, by using poultry in different ways: sous vide duck breast, duck confit compressed with sticky rice and topped with toasted hemp seeds, chicken liver mousse and underscored it with carrot mango puree, pickled green papaya and apple slivers. The classic flavours of sweet, sour, salty, and umami all balanced together expertly. A solid 2022 Hidden Bench pinot noir, picking up on the strawberry, rose and apple, made for a reliable and familiar pairing.

Duck breast and confit duck also informed Niakwa Country Club chef, Lauren Wiebe-Dembowski's plate. Her dish, a celebration of the ingredients she grew up harvesting and foraging: green peas pureed with ginger, chokecherries standing in for umeboshi in a clever chamoy sauce and humble root vegetables made mysterious and sophisticated pave with a touch of miso. Anchoring the plate was a pair of goldfish style wontons filled with shredded duck confit accentuated with mushrooms. With its berry and forest floor elements, Benjamin Bridge's Wild Rock Red blend – cabernet franc and gamay – added further complexity to the dish.

It would come down to three chefs to mount the podium, however and on this evening we judges determined that Chef Norman Pastorin, of Basta! Philipino Kitchen, really captured something brilliant that spoke deeply to the spirit of this competition. His reinterpretation of traditional Filipino sinigang, a beloved seafood stew that's defined



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in large part by its deep tamarind flavour, made brilliant use of local rhubarb to give a distinctly Canadian twist to the dish. A tender cod shrimp and lobster paupiette was joined by a sweet, gently earthy kabocha squash puree, miso glazed daikon, the miso bringing an additional, deep resonance, and two-toned shoestring taro fries. Fresh, bright primary flavours and balanced seasoning allowed the Blanche de L'ermitage, Hopfenstark, from Quebec simultaneously concentrated the stew's flavours and refreshed the palate.

Taking home the People's Choice award on the evening – and very, very close to winning gold from the judges – was chef Darnell Banman from Thermea Spa Winnipeg Village. His superbly executed and technically complex dish featured lamb shoulder, gently cured and slow roasted with a fragrant Baharat spice blend before getting a pomegranate glaze and puffed amaranth crust. Alongside, resting in a fragile shell, silky lamb tartare enhanced with capers and pickled apricot added another delicious twist. Chef even transformed a humble celery root and Parmesan puree into something extraordinary by giving it a luscious, smooth texture and dressing it with roasted kale oil. Soren 2022 Boundary Spring Red Blend from the Similkameen Valley, a blend of five classic red grapes, provided a compelling

Ultimately, however, it was Nola Restaurant's Emily Butcher and her audacious, no-holds-barred, powerhouse of a dish that demanded gold. In theory, a celebration of the chef's multicultural heritage: Chinese, Singaporean and English. On the plate: a tender smoked duck & squash dumpling in massaman curry, fermented kohlrabi salad with black pepper glazed octopus, leche de tigre, pickled eggplant and toasted peanut. Chef was somehow able to persuade that vast array of ingredients and ideas to work together, creating something thrilling. As chef herself said, the dish was simultaneously, "hot and cold, sour and bitter, sweet and spicy, herbaceous and spiced, rich and refreshing." Rosewood's 2021 Riesling AF, from Niagara held its own, managing somehow to not be overshadowed by the immensity of the dish.

Congratulations to chef Butcher for her excellent performance. She's off to Ottawa and we're off to Edmonton where we'll find our fourth competitor as we work our way toward crowning the 2026 Canadian Culinary Champion!



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