



NATIONAL FINALE OF CANADA'S GREAT KITCHEN PARTY
LA GRANDE FINALE DU GRAND PARTY DE CUISINE CANADIEN



The Final Culinary Report Canadian Culinary Championship - 2026

By Chris Johns, National Culinary Advisor

After a blockbuster showing at the regional events, with intense competition across the country, it was an elite contingent of chefs who arrived in Ottawa for this year's Canadian Culinary Championship.

Following on the successful format of 2025, we judges would score two of the three competitions blind, without knowing which chef was responsible for the dishes, while the third Grand Finale would, as in the regional competitions, require the chef to present their dish directly to the judges.

The weekend started, as always, with the challenging, but always fascinating, Mystery Wine competition. David Lawrason, in celebrating his final competition in the role of National Culinary Advisor before handing the reins over to Michael Godell, chose a ripe and perky 2024 Gamay Noir from Malivoire Winery on the Beamsville Bench in Southern Ontario. The wine's refreshing vibrancy, with its cherry-licorice and black pepper character, gave it a food-friendly profile that allowed the chefs to get creative and bold in their dish pairings.

As always, the chefs had to work within the constraints of their budget and this year that amounted to \$700 to feed 350 people. It might seem like a pittance, but the talented and budget-conscious chefs all came in under the allotted amount and some of them by quite a lot, proving that great food doesn't have to be expensive. When the numbers were tallied, there was a full \$1000 left, which was donated directly to our charitable partners, Spirit North and Music Counts.

Although the judges were sequestered away from the action, unable to see what was happening on the floor, we were unanimously impressed with the quality and variety of dishes we were presented with – ranging from mackerel to mushrooms – all carefully calibrated to celebrate the wine.

After tallying the results, it was time to find out which chef was responsible for what dish so they could be properly credited with the right score.

Standouts on the evening – as I later found out after tallying the judge's scores – included Calgary Chef, Dean Fast from Rouge Restaurant, who turned out a superb dish of lightly cured and confit sausage of salmon topped with a puff of crispy fish skin and accompanied

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by a fresh cucumber and celery sauce vierge. Hints of apple and strawberry informed a pinot and ginger “effervescence” that supported the wine while a spray of lime and rhubarb foam accentuated the Gamay’s acidity and bridged the two components.

Winnipeg’s Emily Butcher of Nola Restaurant, in her second appearance at the CCC, chose to underpin her pairing by supporting the ripe fruit and depth of the wine. She offered up one of this year’s most fashionable ingredients: cabbage. She slowly roasted the heads into caramelized tenderness before supporting them with a superb black garlic baba ganoush and persimmon fennel, the accompaniments bringing elegance and character to this otherwise humble root vegetable.

Chef Lacey Coffin from Vu Restaurant in St. John’s chose to work with pork belly, offering up a tender slice of belly, garnished with a complex basil, citrus sugar, in a vibrant, sweet green pea puree. A pair of pink, pickled radish circles cut the pork’s inherent richness and echoed the blend of acidity and soft tannins in the wine.

Without a doubt, the evening’s most ambitious dish came from Chef Isäel Gadoua of Restaurant Chez Jean-Paul in Montreal. Simple, elegant and unexpected, he paired an almost savoury chocolate and mushroom cake with an earthy Jerusalem artichoke crème anglaise, a Jerusalem artichoke and sunflower seed cremeux and a mushroom meringue. It was a bold and clever choice that, in less capable hands, might have led to disaster, but his flawless command of flavours and techniques resulted in one of the most impressive pairings of the evening.

After such an impressive showing at Mystery Wine, expectations were high the next morning for what remains, for the chefs at least, the weekend’s most nerve-wracking and intense competition: the dreaded Black Box!

This year’s box, as usual, contained a selection of incredible Canadian ingredients and products. Some, like the legendary poutine cheese curds from St. Albert Dairy Co-Op (the finest curds in Canada) were almost certainly familiar to our chefs. Others, like the rare and delicate, but profoundly aromatic sea truffles, a kind of North Atlantic seaweed hand harvested by The Dulse Man from the shores of the Bay of Fundy, were likely new to the chefs.

Adding to the challenge, we also required the chefs to utilize five more ingredients across the two dishes they were tasked with creating for the judges. Lufa Farms provided each chef with one bunch each of the freshest, most vibrant mizuna, dandelion greens and mustard greens, each bunch grown sustainably in urban rooftop greenhouses.

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From the Canadian Pickle Emporium, they were given two jars each of Pickled Sweet Rhubarb, each tender spear of heirloom Victoria rhubarb, hand-harvested from the banks of the Restigouche River in Northern New Brunswick. The saucily named, Jewels Under the Kilt nut company, provided each chef with a batch of maple-roasted, Ontario grown pecans. From the idyllic fields of Doug Unrau's organic farm near MacGregor, Manitoba, the chefs were given 600 grams of cornmeal. Ground to a coarse consistency by the good folks at Adagio Acres, it is some of the finest organic, non-gmo cornmeal available not just in Canada, but on the whole planet.

Finally, our curveball this year, and the ingredient that every single chef misidentified, 1kg of tender, pink and luscious ground duck from King Cole Ducks. They've been raising ducks, and only ducks, at King Cole for over 75 years, and we were delighted to showcase their products even if, in the heat of the moment, almost everyone thought they'd been given ground pork.

In speaking with the chefs after the competition, it seems this was a challenging black box for most of them, though you wouldn't know it by the quality of dishes they created. Once again, after compiling all the judges' scores, it was told to me who offered each dish.

Highlights of the black box include Hearth Restaurant chef Kevin Monych's two dishes. The first, tortellini filled with ground duck, the maple-roasted pecans and cheese curds in a truffle parmesan cream. His second dish included polenta with bacon, pickled rhubarb and wilted greens.

From Atelier Tony in Moncton, Chef Niguel De Leon presented a mixed bitter green salad with curds, pecans and a rhubarb vinaigrette that was a pleasure to eat, while his second dish treated the ground duck as a kebab seasoned with sea truffle, a green miso and served alongside creamed polenta.

Representing Edmonton and The Old Red Barn restaurant, Chef Tyson Wright chose to turn the cornmeal into a type of risotto along with a sea truffle tea, a duck meatball and a parmesan crisp. He warmed his greens and served them as a warm salad with roasted pecans, curds and pickled rhubarb.

No single competition, of course, can decide the Canadian Culinary Championship. It is only the combined scores from all three competitions that determine our winner. Mystery Wine, Black Box and Grand Finale are all weighted equally, so performing well in each competition is crucial.

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Nonetheless, there's always something special about the Grand Finale gala evening. This is when the chefs prepare the dish they won their regional competition with, a dish they have perfected over weeks and months and know intimately. This year was especially impressive because each chef took their winning dish and tweaked and improved it so that what was once merely excellent started approaching perfection.

Special notice goes to the three chefs who ultimately stood on the podium. Taking home the bronze was hometown chef, Jason Sawision of Stofa Restaurant for his complex and crowd-pleasing dish of seared scallops with adobo, a taro Aji Amarillo fritter, almond pudding, mango salsa and 'chorizo' shrimp toast with poblano pepper sauce, tortilla tuile and cilantro. His pairing, De Simone's 2021 Motivation Fume Blanc, from Four Mile Creek in Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON, did a stellar job of collaborating with the myriad flavours in this winning dish.

The evening's silver medal went to Chef Jonathan Williams of the Park Hyatt in Toronto. As he did in Toronto, he once again impressed the judges with a dish that took two ingredients: beef and carrot, and transformed them into something precise and profound. The beef, a single slice of short rib, was brined in coffee shio koji, coriander, and black pepper before being smoked into swooning submission. Alongside, a "very good" carrot (an understatement if ever there was one) involved a carrot that, through alchemical transfiguration involving juicing, dehydration, rehydration, and glazing with Minus 8 Icewine vinegar, was transformed from a humble root vegetable into a precious delicacy. Leaning Post Winery's luscious and rich 2020 Syrah proved to be a harmonious, seemingly inevitable pairing.

Finally, our gold medal and \$10,000.00 cash prize were awarded to Chef Jaeyoung Park of Boulevard Kitchen and Oyster Bar. This was the third win in a row for Vancouver as the city continues to turn out fierce competitors. Among the most complex and precise dishes ever served at the Canadian Culinary Championship, chef Park's dish featuring Wingtat Canada chicken told a story that traced a path from his home in Korea to Vancouver and from his time as a young culinary student to his role as Chef De Cuisine at Boulevard. A flawless 'poulet pressé' anchored one edge of the plate while a gochujang gastric glazed chicken heart – smoky, spicy and unbelievably delightful to eat – rested opposite. A carefully and delicately formed crispy chicken skin 'tartlet' was filled with flavourful chicken liver mousse. Tying the whole thing together, a simple, but excellent sauce of chicken jus with garlic, thyme and chicken fat. The Okanagan Valley's Tantalus Winery provided the wine pairing with a 2023 Chardonnay that was as iconic as chef Park's dish.

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It was an honour and a pleasure to spend this time with these immensely talented chefs and be able to taste the product of their efforts. Their ability to perform to the highest standards under incredibly strict conditions should be inspiring to anyone who has ever chopped an onion. On behalf of myself, the judges and everyone involved with the Canadian Culinary Championship: thank you.

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