

## OTTAWA 2026 CULINARY REPORT

And we're off! We kicked off our year in style in Ottawa earlier this week with the first regional qualifying event of the season. This is an extra special year for us, as it marks our 20th anniversary of celebrating Canadian culinary excellence, and in honour of that milestone, we wanted to give former winners the first shot at coming back to compete. The chefs of Ottawa heard the call and responded with incredible enthusiasm, so all five of our competitors were previous champions. We also threw in a unique twist by inviting one chef — someone with a long history of successful showings at the competition — to serve as our Chef of Distinction and receive an automatic invitation to the finals. That honour went to none other than Marc Lepine, two-time Canadian Culinary Champion (2012, 2016). At the end of the night, our winner would become Chef Lepine's partner, and together they would form Team Ottawa, who would compete for the championship and its \$20,000 cash prize.

To determine that winner, we once again called on the expertise of our illustrious judging panel, including our Chef of Distinction. Joining me at the judges' table were culinary historian, world traveler, global eater, and *Taste & Travel* publisher Janet Boileau; former Canadian Culinary Champion and chef of Antheia Restaurant Briana Kim; editor of *Sage* and *Diplomat* magazines Jennifer Campbell; and Ottawa's head judge, Cory Haskins, Dean of the School of Business and Hospitality at Algonquin College.

Sequestered inside the private dining room of Raphael Peruvian Cuisine, once again our venue for this year's competition, we judges were tasked with judging each dish blind, so we had no idea who was responsible for a dish while we tasted it. Only after the judge's scores were tallied did we learn who had created which dish and the results were as follows.

Our first dish of five on the night, would ultimately take home bronze. "East Coast Summer for a Kitchen Party," saw Stofa chef Jason Sawision reimagine an East Coast lobster boil, transforming something rustic and informal into something technically precise and carefully considered. On the plate: kataifi-wrapped lobster and langoustine torchon, lobster coral agnolotti (which transforms colour when cooked, mirroring a boiling lobster), a steamed sweet corn timbale, and smoked beef tongue with corn salad. The elements worked together to layer richness, smoke, and sweetness. A passionfruit-vermouth sauce tied the components together with acidity and herbaceous depth, paired with Black Bank Hill's Liberté 2023, a Rhône-style white whose florality and minerality echo the dish's seafood and herb notes.

Raphael Peruvian Cuisine's own Lizardo Becerra presented "Sablefish Usuzukuri & Manila Clam Tart," accompanied by a beautifully illustrated menu detailing each ingredient. Designed as a

triptych representing Canada's North Pacific — depth, shoreline, and memory. On the plate, eleven-day dry-aged sablefish, shaped like coral, was paired with pistachio emulsion and achiote soil. A delicate leek-and-apple tart carried citrus-marinated Manila clams and aged Ontario cheese, while a clam-juice gelato with gremolata and an aji limo–lemongrass gel closed the sequence and earned chef the People's Choice Award. The superb, mineral-driven Grange of Prince Edward's 2023 Aurelia Chardonnay, built from hand-picked grapes, had enough elegance and complexity to complement all three elements on the plate.

Coconut Lagoon's Joe Thottungal presented "Tides of Canada," an ingenious nose-to-tail tribute to a single Bay of Fundy lobster. The tail was poached, while the claw, knuckle, and leg meat became a mousseline folded into a yuca cake. The shells were transformed into a coral tuile. Moringa (seed "pearls," leaf oil, and gel) added earthy contrast, while roasted September tomatoes with bone marrow brought umami richness, and Malabar tamarind supplied a sweet-sour-smoky gastrique. The pairing, Divergence Wines' 2021 Mazza Vineyard Viognier, was chosen first for the winemaker's craftsmanship, then matched to the dish's richness and acidity.

Chef Ian Carswell of Black Tartan Kitchen took a playful, hospitality-driven approach to beet, haskap, potato, and venison with "We're Rooting That Nothing Beets Our Berry Deer Dish." The "meat and potatoes" concept was reworked into multiple forms: beet-and-haskap-crusting venison loin in fried potato coils, a venison terrine, braised shoulder baked into a potato bun, and a beet-haskap flan, all tied together by a chocolate-finished Sauce Grand Veneur. Espresso, buckwheat, and juniper deepen the autumnal profile, and the dish is paired with a local Blaufränkisch ("Blau") from Rosewood, chosen for its gentle tannins. His playful, but technically elaborate dish was the evening's silver medal winner.

The evening's gold medal was earned by Chef Yannick La Salle, chef of the Supreme Court of Canada, who presented a flawless dish of "Charlevoix Veal Sweetbreads." Centered on veal, apples, and maple syrup as emblematic Canadian ingredients, a concept sparked by a personal moment: the chef's son collecting maple sap. Sweetbreads were glazed with a mustard-cider-maple reduction and topped with a celeriac tuile shaped like a maple leaf. Salt-baked celeriac, Eden apples, hazelnuts, pickled celery, and horseradish added texture and brightness, while a maple-wood-smoked butter purée (using trim from the same celeriac) added indulgence. A veal and crab-apple jus finished the plate, paired with a Québec Chardonnay chosen for its acidity and terroir expression.

We knew that bringing together so many strong, proven competitors would result in some exceptional cooking and we were not disappointed. Across all five dishes: whole-ingredient utilization (shells, trim, and offcuts repurposed rather than discarded), and a strong sense of regional identity resulted in a superb competition.