Saskatchewan Culinary Report 2026

A cancelled flight and a Cannonball Run style mad dash across the Prairies meant that I arrived at the judge's table for our Saskatoon CCC qualifier with only 4 minutes to spare before the first plate hit the table.

The effort would be well rewarded, however, as our six chefs outdid themselves with a selection of the Prairie's best ingredients including, but not limted to: bison, beef, wild rice, foraged mushrooms, haskap berries and sea buckthorn all paired with a selection of Canada's finest vintages.

Waiting patiently for my arrival at the judges' table was a selection of Saskatoon's finest palates including our Chef of Distinction, Anthony McCarthy, regional Gold Medalist here in 2011, Regional Bronze Medalist 2010, 2016 & 202. Award-winning writer, poet, chef, ex-restaurateur, runner, and chocolate lover, dee Hobsbawn-Smith was back, as was The Barn at Wind's Edge executive chef, Michael Beaulé. We were fortunate to have author and former Head Judge, Amy Jo Ehman, filling in last minute and, of course, our fine Head Judge, Noelle Chorney.

The evening began in earnest in very sophisticated style thanks to Chef Scott Torgerson of the University Club of Saskatchewan who took us from "Summer into Autumn" with a technically superb offering that impressed the judges with its combination of rich, luxuriousness and delicate restraint. A honey-cider glazed duck breast, first cooked sous vide and then seared, came with pumpernickel, a turnip shell and a Black Fox gin sour cherry sauce. Alongside sat light-pickled rhubarb with stewed rowanberry and elderflower gel, Simpkins Market parsnip foam with puffed grains, and a foie gras press veined with Earl Grey and cardamom on a speculoos crisp. Haywire's 2025 Pinot Gris from the

Naramata Bench brought crisp apple and pear to balance the richer components.

Darren Craddock of Dakota Dunes Resort, whose "Bounty of the Rolling Prairies" was a celebration of prairie-raised bison. A sous-vide striploin, butter-basted and rubbed with Black Trumpet mushroom dust, shared the plate with bison cheeks braised for eight hours and pressed with bourbon-cured foie gras. The crunch came from a puffed crisp made from the animal's tendons, the product of a 24-hour process of braising, pressing, slicing and dehydrating, then dusted with juniper and cocoa nibs. A smoked late-season corn emulsion, a brown-butter purée of Loreburn Farms carrots, a gastrique of spruce-tip vinegar and foraged highbush cranberries, haskap gel and a chickpea panisse cube rounded it out. Here the wine came first: Closson Chase's 2024 Churchside Pinot Noir inspired the dish, and Craddock's long friendship with winemaker Keith Tyers shaped the pairing.

Garret "Rusty" Thienes of Harvest Eatery delivered "Prairie & Fire," an all-beef portrait of southwest Saskatchewan ranch country. A Certified Angus Beef Prime strip loin was aged briefly under koji, cold-smoked raw, cooked sous vide, then seared in tallow and blistered with a torch for an ember-char crust. A puffed beef tendon chip carried bone marrow custard and sea buckthorn caviar, a nose-to-tail statement in a single bite. A fire line of charred allium ash ran across the plate, dotted with saskatoon-juniper and sage oil gels, with a smoked red fife crumble tucked around the meat. Moraine Winery's Naramata Bench Meritage had the structure for the beef and the cassis and black cherry to reach across to the saskatoon.

Justin O'Reilly of Loqui took the most playful route with "Where the Wild Rice Grows & the Northern Rivers Flow," told in two chapters. The first was a wild rice sushi roll with enoki, carrot and lacto-fermented chanterelle mayo, topped with pickled indigo milk cap "sashimi." The second was a wild rice and tofu fazzoletto, the "little handkerchief," folded over a hidden mix of masutake, chanterelle, indigo milk cap and porcini in a stinging nettle cashew cream, a

stand-in for the forest floor. Every mushroom was hand-foraged in Saskatchewan by the chef himself. Blue Grouse's 2023 Pinot Noir from the Cowichan Valley, a place O'Reilly knows from time spent there, echoed the earthiness with raspberry, cherry and wet-stone minerality.

Shaun McConnell of Riverside Country Club returned to bison from Quill Creek Farms in two preparations: a pepper- and juniper-crusted striploin and a lacquered cheek pressé. Roasted celeriac mousseline, black garlic and charred onion purée, and a haskap-Syrah jus finished the plate, topped with a potato crisp puff and a peppery nasturtium leaf. Le Vieux Pin's 2022 Syrah Cuvée Classique tied it together, its dark fruit meeting the haskap and its spice meeting the peppered crust.

Taszia Thakur of Calories Restaurant, took "The Path Less Travelled" with bison six ways: bone marrow, bones, tendon, tongue, suet and striploin. A bone marrow panna cotta sat inside an edible tallow-baked "bone," lifted by spherified sea buckthorn. A lightly smoked tataki came with puffed tendon, tamari aioli and compressed lacto-fermented kabocha squash. Braised tongue appeared twice, stuffed into pan-fried morels and as a sourdough-crusted croquette, both on a marrow-bone demi-glace. Thakur also shared a first-line-cook memory of a striploin with roasted marrow bone, which this plate reimagines. The pairing was Covert Farms' organic 2018 Amicitia from Oliver, a Bordeaux-style blend whose richness and earthiness suited the morels and marrow.

At the end of the night, after all the scores were tallied, it was Garrett 'Rusty' Thienes who took home the gold medal (and the People's Choice, a rare event) followed by Chef Torgerson in silver and Chef Thakur in bronze.

We can't wait to see Team Saskatchewan: Anthony McCarthy and Garrett 'Rusty' Thienes, at the Canadian Culinary Championship!