

St. John's Culinary Report 2026

Cod, partridgeberries, spruce, beets and carrots were favourite ingredients of our chefs in St. John's this year and what a

Sharing the judges' table were some of the best-informed palates in the province. Ron Delaney, Tourism Director, blogger, critic, radio host and lifelong student of food, brought his usual curiosity. Angie Ryan, a six-time cook at the James Beard House, Culinary Olympian and Operations Manager at the School Lunch Association, brought an exacting eye. Italian-born Chef Maurizio Modica, a proud supporter of life in Newfoundland and Labrador was in attendance along with Denise King, who has competed on the local scene for more than twenty years and now shares her talents at CONA in St. John's. Rounding out the panel was Bob Arniel, former head judge of this very competition, Canadian Certified Chef de Cuisine and recipient of Cuisine Canada's Lifetime Achievement Award and of course our Chef of Distinction for St. John's, Roger Andrews.

Brennen Tower-Bowering's Roulade de Cabillaud married Newfoundland food culture with his love of fine dining. A cod farce built from caramelized carrots, salt beef and pickled beets was wrapped in pickled carrots and gently poached in clarified butter. Brown butter carrot purée, a mustard-pickle gel, pickled beet foam, a candied carrot tuile and a tangle of shoestring potatoes completed the plate. It was something of a technical catalogue, with pickling, caramelization, clarification, poaching, gelification, foaming and tuile-making all on show. His Tawse Chardonnay from Niagara was an astute choice. The white peach, yuzu blossom and honeycomb in the glass echoed the caramelized carrots, while its citrus cut the butter and met the acidity of the pickles.

Lacey Coffin's Cod Mosaic, which would take the bronze, was, in her words, a love letter to the province that shaped her. Her aim was the simple things of Newfoundland, a taste of childhood elevated for the adult palate, and she hit it squarely. The mosaic of cod, wrapped in a delicate brandade foam, sat beside beet caviar that glistened like sea glass, while carrot lent sweetness. A greens oil and crisps of salt beef carried the wilderness through the plate, bringing ocean, earth and tradition together. Her "Our Story Charming White" VQA, fruity with earthy undertones, was a lovely match. Its minerality and wet-stone notes tied to the greens and carrots, while its fruit balanced the cod and beet caviar. It was dish worthy of her bronze medal win.

Then came Kyle Puddester's "The Forest Floor," a dish of real poetry and discipline that would ultimately bring home the gold. It was an exploration of the Newfoundland woods built around foraged wild mushrooms at the very peak of their season.

A chaga mushroom soil formed the visual base, its bitterness anchoring the plate. Alongside it, a layered, compressed wild mushroom terrine gave the dish its structure, while a silky mushroom custard, wrapped in a thin veil of mushroom koji, added a fermented umami that rewarded each bite. Crisp mushroom tuile shaped like fern leaves and dusted with spruce powder reinforced the woodland theme, and roasted mushrooms tossed in a mushroom glaze and finished with birch syrup brought the earth forward. Lacto-fermented green blueberries and a partridgeberry gel cut through with acidity and brightness, keeping the plate lively rather than heavy.

The Closson Chase 2024 Vineyard Pinot Noir was an ideal companion. Its acidity and red fruit refreshed the palate and echoed the fermented berries, the birch syrup flattered the wine's fruit, and the spruce bridged to its delicate woodland notes. It was a pairing built on earth, acidity and fruit, and a fitting finish to one of the most thoughtful dishes of the season.

The chef who came closest to matching Puddester was Cody Lambe, whose Pastrami claimed both silver and the People's Choice award, a rare double. Lambe described the dish as a personal challenge: could artisan deli technique and wild, foraged Newfoundland flavours tell a story together? They most certainly could. The pastrami was cured for three days with local spruce tips and juniper berries, finished with a coriander and spruce tip rub, then smoked and steamed for hours until yielding and aromatic.

It arrived with turnip greens braised in cider vinegar, pork belly and bedalia onions, demi-glace, a homemade partridgeberry BBQ sauce and a Russian dressing crumble. There was a lot going on, but every element had a job to do. His pairing, a naturally crafted 2022 Therianthropy "Le Maillot" Cabernet Sauvignon Cabernet Franc, was a smart one. Its bright red fruit lifted the tart, slightly bitter partridgeberry sauce and balanced the vinegar and the richness of the demi-glace and pastrami, while the Cabernet Franc's herbal, forest-floor character mirrored the spruce, juniper and spiced crumble.

Michael Wozney's Salt Cured Cod and Chips was a playful, fall-flavoured take on a Newfoundland classic. Local cod, salt-cured with golden and tube beets for a striking contrast of colour, was shaved over a tapioca cracker that had been cooked, dehydrated and fried, a clever stand-in for the chip. Beet gels underlined the earthy sweetness, while onion and charcoal dust supplied the flavour of the chip itself, and foraged garnishes finished the plate. In place of wine, Wozney chose Quidi Vidi's Iceberg Lager, brewed with iceberg water by a local brewery in its 30th year. It was a fitting match for cod from the same North Atlantic, and a charming reminder that a great pairing doesn't always need a cork. Together they spoke of the earthiness of the rock, the salt of the sea and the sweetness of the people who live here.

With the scores tallied, there was little left to say but this: Newfoundland showed up.