Vancouver Culinary Report 26

To The Pipe Room for this year's 20th Anniversary All-Star Vancouver competition, where the city's finest chefs put on an absolute master class in technical precision and culinary creativity and proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Vancouver will once again be a city to be reckoned with.

Joining me at the judges' table to separate the sublime from the merely excellent was Andrea Carlson, chef and owner of One MICHELIN Star Burdock & Co., MICHELIN Guide-recommended Bar Gobo, and Harvest Community Foods. Scott Jaeger, chef, mentor and Canadian Bocuse d'Or candidate in 2007, brought the experience of two Culinary Olympics gold medals, in 2008 and 2016. Viranlly Liemena, hospitality consultant, west-coast editor for GLORY Professional and food and beverage correspondent for Destination Vancouver, advocates for our city's culinary industry on the global stage. Douglas Chang, a former chef, now owns An and Omi knives in Chinatown. Our Chef of Distinction was Alex Chen. Guiding it all, as always, was Vancouver's head judge, award-winning cookbook author, mentor and passionate advocate for British Columbia's culinary community, Joie Alvaro Kent.

First to the table was Robert Lee from Five Sails by Alex Kim with a Duck & Prawn Duet inspired by a piano duet, two parts played together without either overpowering the other. Rich Fraser Valley duck met sweet BC spot prawn in a head-to-tail dish. A terrine of brined duck breast, prawn, foie gras and wood ear was wrapped in prawn mousse and glazed with dark duck consommé. Beside it sat a crisp taro puff filled with duck confit and Japanese-style curry, and a spot prawn tartare in a fried lotus root crisp. Watercress emulsion and ginger-apple purée refreshed the palate. NOMAD Estate's Keeved Cider, from Summerland, was an inspired pairing, its apples echoing the prawn and its acidity cutting the foie gras and jus. It was a jaw-dropping opener to the competition and would go on to win both Silver and People's Choice for the night.

The Fish Man's Bo Li turned to Cantonese banquet cuisine for Tides & Forest. Abalone, slowly braised until tender, came with a concentrated jus of long, savoury finish. Morels were filled with shrimp mousse and Dungeness crab in the Bai Hua style, with lily bulb, water chestnut and peas adding sweetness and crunch. Quartz & Yarrow's Sustainable White lifted the shellfish with apple and citrus while its savoury finish met the earthy morel.

Next came a black pearl in every sense. First time competitor Felix Zhou from Atlas Steak and Fish presented a Pacific Black Pearl Raviolo: a whole raw scallop, seasoned with nori and wrapped in prawn mousseline, then encased in squid ink pasta. The challenge, as with a Beef Wellington, is the narrow window between undercooked and overcooked, and the scallop appeared perfectly tender when cut open. An aerated vermouth velouté floated alongside, with trout caviar, pickled lettuce heart, a crisp rice wafer and dill oil adding salinity, acidity and crunch. Culmina's 2025 Everyday Collection Sauvignon Blanc from the Okanagan, with a touch of Sémillon for texture, matched the dish well, pairing Pacific and Okanagan in one glass.

Then came a lesson in humility from the kitchen's most modest workhorses. 2024 Canadian Culinary Champion, Jasper Cruikshank who now oversees the kitchen at l'Abbatoir, built Alliums around scallion pasta filled with braised beef cheek, a baby leek terrine, a cave-aged Gruyère and cipollini soubise tartlet, and braised shallot with leek cream. A ramp gelée cup held buttermilk ranch, and pickled garlic seed pods stood in for capers. All were tied together by a chive emulsion, an onion tuile and a clear French onion consommé. It was a luxurious dish made without a single luxury ingredient. Fort Berens' 2025 Pinot Noir Reserve met it with acidity and weight. It was a dish that displayed incredible skill and artistry that was deeply delicious and was rewarded with the night's gold medal.

The duck returned as Chef Clement Chan from The Apron built on Yarrow Meadows duck and classical French technique with Japanese accents. A confit leg roulade, bright with umeboshi, nori and sultanas, sat beside a duck-skin tuile. A heart and gizzard ragout was finished with shiso, and a crisp potato cannoli held liver pâté brightened with calamansi. Dashi-compressed radish with yuzu kosho added a spark of heat and citrus. Poplar Grove's 2020 Syrah stood alongside the duck without overpowering it, its dark fruit meeting the honey and its acidity cutting the confit.

Dessert, fittingly, marked an anniversary. Bal Ajagoankar from Desi Indian Lounge created Botanical Reverie to commemorate Kitchen Party's 20th year. Paan mithai filled with strawberry compote shared the plate with a carrot and fennel pudding sphere and a cherry-beet-lime mousse. Rabri crémeux rested on a cardamom chocolate feuilletine disc, with saffron crème anglaise tying the whole composition together. LaStella's Moscato d'Osoyoos, floral and gently effervescent, drew out the saffron, cardamom and fruit. It was our final dish of the night and the one that would take home the bronze medal.

With our winners decided we have a situation in Vancouver that echoes that of Ottawa, two cities locked in a fierce rivalry, where both competitors going to the finals are former Canadian Culinary Championship gold medal winners. With four more cities to compete, will we have any other teams with such a storied history of winning? I can't wait to find out!