

VICTORIA 2026 CULINARY REPORT

We arrived back in Victoria after a too-long 9-year hiatus and brought high expectations for the garden city with us and were not disappointed.

From our private tasting room in the Oak Bay Beach Hotel, the judges got to work scoring each dish. Helping me separate the superb from the merely excellent at the judges' table were some of the island's best palates. Cory Pelan, owner of The Whole Beast and The Village Butcher, and Mentorship and Scholarship Chair for The Chefs Table Society of BC. Jen Leung, author at Edible Vancouver Island and a judge for the YAM Best Restaurant Awards. Chef, restaurant consultant and recipe developer. Chef Dana Reinhardt. Elizabeth Nyland, editor of Edible Vancouver Island. Our Chef of Distinction was Milton Rebello, chef and owner of Liv Café Bistro, and a two-time Gold Medal Plates winner (2012 and 2014) who took home bronze at the CCC in 2013. A special thank you goes to our Head Judge for Victoria, Joanne Sasvari, editor-in-chief at Page One Publishing, editor of Vitis wine magazine, facilitator of the annual YAM Best Restaurant Awards and a best-selling cookbook author.

Our first dish of the night (one that eventually went on to win the silver medal) was from Paul Moran of Sixty-Forty, who built his plate around two local stars: line-caught black cod from Finest at Sea and organic Saanich Peninsula vegetables from Square Root Organics. The cod was cured, then smoked over wild alder and Timothy hay, and landed beside a house-made crème fraîche. Fresh wasabi from Malcolm Island, and dill and tarragon from the restaurant's own garden lifted the accompanying cream sauce. The only import was black rice, and it came with a confession. It had been overcooked for another service, so the kitchen dehydrated and puffed it rather than discard it. Prohibition Vineyard's 2025 Ortega, from the same peninsula, met the richness of the fish and the herbal notes in the cream.

Sam Harris of Café Brio looked to the water and the woods for his dish of wild spot prawns, gently cooked in a court bouillon of white wine, organic onions, carrots and wild mushrooms. Sharing the plate with foraged chanterelles served two ways: pickled and reduced with dried porcini into a savoury ketchup that balanced the prawns' sweetness. The crunch came from a guanciale crisp made from Sloping Hill Farm pork jowl, cured with fennel seed and red pepper, air-dried for three weeks, then sliced and baked. Radicchio, cipollini onions and potatoes anchored the dish, tied together by an aioli of roasted potato and elephant garlic. Sea Star Vineyard's 2025 "Salish Sea" White Blend from Pender Island was a fitting island companion.

Corbin Mathany of Ugly Duckling called his dish a time capsule of spring and summer, and it delivered. His steelhead was cured overnight in salt, sugar, clove, allspice, fennel and citrus zest, just

a dusting, enough to concentrate flavour without drifting into gravlax territory. A pass of the torch, aburi-style, added subtle char, echoed in a vinaigrette of 18-month spot prawn garum, tomato water and rice vinegar, clarified with the milk punch method borrowed from the bar. Cherry tomatoes from Mason Street Farm, some cured and some lightly pickled, carried Victoria's summer into autumn. Exciting flavours, exceptional produce and an inspired pairing, Mission Hill Family Estate's 2022 "Perpetua" Chardonnay, were enough to catapult chef Mathany to the top of the podium.

Castro Boateng of House of Boateng offered something deeply personal, a tribute to the chefs who taught him to cure fish. His tuna was bathed for 12 hours in a cooled marinade of maple syrup, soy, ginger and garden apples, then dry-cured for 24 hours and thinly sliced. It came with a buckwheat noodle salad with preserved chanterelles, fiddleheads, sea asparagus and seaweed in miso-orange vinaigrette. Apricot purée simmered with soy, ginger and mirin added sweet-savoury balance, while wasabi mayonnaise and a kimchi-dusted puffed rice cracker brought warmth rather than heat. Rainmaker's 2022 "Rattlesnake Vineyard" Viognier from Oliver, 100% estate-grown, echoed the apricot with roasted almond and peach notes, brought acidity and richness.

At the end of the night Chefs Moran and Mathany would be crowned the winners and they were doubly rewarded as, in an unprecedented turn of events, they tied for the People's Choice award. We can't wait to see what Team Victoria: Corban Mathany and Milton Rebello cook up for the Canadian Culinary Championship.