

# Canadian Culinary Championships 2017



The winners on the podium. From left are chef Joe Thottungal (silver), Coconut Lagoon, Ottawa; chef Jinhee Lee (gold), Foreign Concept, Calgary; and chef Eric Hanson (bronze), Prairie Noodle Shop, Edmonton. Gold Medal Plates and the Canadian Culinary Championships have raised over 12 million dollars for Olympic athletes.

What better way to celebrate Canada's 150 than with a trio of chefs that reflect our cultural mosaic? How fitting to have a woman on the podium again. The last was Melissa Craig, nine years ago, too long. The individuals on the podium and the flavours on the plate this year are the future of Canada's food culture. Hold on! It's going to be a thrilling ride.

## **Jinhee Lee, gold** **Foreign Concept, Calgary**

A decade ago, Jinhee Lee arrived in Canada from South Korea to brush up on her English skills and broaden her knowledge of western culture. She signed up for a cooking course where an instructor's well-turned Hollandaise inspired her to switch directions and enroll in SAIT's Professional Cooking program. Today she's our national culinary champion.

Following SAIT and a stint on the line at Belgo, she was hired by chef Duncan Ly to be third cook at Hotel Arts. She worked her way up the ladder until she became executive chef at the hotel's Raw Bar, all the while refining her alternative Asian cuisine. While at Hotel Arts, Ly and Lee, then acting as sous chef, brought home the silver medal from the 2014 Culinary Championship.

This year, with a new restaurant, Foreign Concept, Lee and Ly (with Ly now acting as sous chef to his

former student) won the gold. In doing so, Lee aced all three events, including the challenging Black Box competition. While most chefs struggled to tame the salt cod component, Lee steamed up a cod and cabbage dumpling and sliced and milk-soaked thin pieces into cod sashimi, an impressive dish.

It's been a quick rise over the past decade and Canada is now proud to have Jinhee Lee firmly at the top of our culinary world.

*John Gilchrist, Calgary senior judge.*

## **Chef Joe Thottungal, silver** **Coconut Lagoon, Ottawa**

I fell hard for the cuisine of Kerala at the Onam Sadya, an annual harvest feast of curries, pickles, fruits and nuts, in meticulous order, on banana leaf. The dinner was hosted by chef Joe Thottungal at his then new restaurant, the Coconut Lagoon. That was a dozen years ago. Two weeks ago, Thottungal won a silver medal at the Canadian Culinary Championships, with dishes that spoke forcefully of his dual loves, Canada and Kerala.

Thottungal comes to his own place via the South Indian state of Kerala, where he was born, to Mumbai where he trained, to his first kitchen job in Saudi Arabia. He launched his Canadian culinary career at Toronto's

Centro in 1998, working his way up the food chain with jobs in various Ontario hotels and at the fine dining room of the Windsor Casino, before the dream of his own place became real. Thottungal opened Coconut Lagoon in 2004, determined to introduce the abundantly-flavoured dishes of his homeland to Canada's capital. And now to the wider country.

*Anne de Brisay, Ottawa senior judge.*

## **Eric Hanson, bronze** **Prairie Noodle Shop, Edmonton**

Hanson's win last fall at Edmonton's Gold Medal Plates was not without raised eyebrows. Somebody asked me: 'How can a guy that cooks in a noodle shop be the best? How will he stack up against the deep field of competitors at nationals?' The questions have been answered. How we eat and how we cook these days is light years away from a decade ago. Talent is found in all sorts of places. Eric's exuberant, freewheeling approach to food was best exemplified at the CCC by his black box dish—salt cod brandade in a broth of beer, honey and bacon thickened with quail egg, made electric green by the addition of oil made from leeks—dramatic and delicious. 🍴

*Mary Bailey, Edmonton senior judge.*