

THE VANCOUVER SUN

THE HEAT IS ON

11 chefs set to battle it out for Canada's top culinary prize.

The Vancouver Sun 4 Feb 2015 +5 more JOANNE SASVARI

Outside Okanagan College, the thermometer was hovering around a decidedly frosty -29 C. Inside, though, things were really heating up. In fact, you could say it was the kind of heat that if you can't stand it, you'd better get out of the kitchen.

None of the chefs competing in the black box portion of last year's Canadian Culinary Championships in Kelowna had fled from the kitchen,

although a few looked like they wished they could. They had only an hour to whip a random selection of regional ingredients — including trout, parsnips and lion's mane mushrooms — into dishes that would wow the judges and just maybe earn them the title of Canada's best chef. The pressure was seriously on. It's little wonder, then, that B.C.'s 2015 competitor, Kristian Eligh, chef de

cuisine at Vancouver's Hawthorth Restaurant, was both dreading and looking forward to the black box.

"It's incredible to see veteran chefs so stressed," he said. "I think the black box is the true challenge in its own way. You have an hour to prepare 50 plates, and an hour is nothing."

Eligh is one of 11 chefs from across Canada who will be gathering in Kelowna Friday and Saturday to compete for Canada's top culinary prize.

"It's kind of the final preparation time," says Eligh, who had always wanted to compete, but was finally inspired to throw his hat in the ring by the students he works with in the



Chef Patrick Garland of Absinthe Café in Ottawa, above, is armed and ready for combat in this year's edition of the Canadian Culinary Championships, which is like the Stanley Cup with whisks.

Hawthorth Young Chefs Scholarship program. "It's getting real."

Think of the Canadian Culinary Championships as the Stanley Cup with whisks. To get here, the chefs had to first be invited to compete in the Gold Medal Plates in their regions. Then they had to create an extraordinary dish that would beat anything their colleagues could concoct. After that, the gold-medal

winners in cities from Victoria to St. John's, N.L., gather in Kelowna to compete against each other for national gold.

Just being invited to compete is a major accomplishment; winning can be a complete gamechanger in a chef's career. Just ask previous winners such as Melissa Craig of Whistler's Bearfoot Bistro and Makoto Ono of Vancouver's Pidgin.

The Gold Medal Plates competition first began back in 2003 as a fundraiser for the Canadian Olympic Foundation. In the 12 years since, it has raised more than \$8.2 million for programs such as Own the Podium. More than that, it has elevated the status of Canada's culinary culture in cities big and small from coast to coast.

"To see how it's grown even in the last 10 years, it's so exciting," said head judge James Chatto, the celebrated Toronto food writer who's been involved with the competition since its second year. "I absolutely love it."

For the first few years, the competition moved from city to city, from east to west and back again. "And then it occurred to us that we had to recreate the weekend every year from scratch," Chatto says.

The organizers decided it should stay in one place. They liked the idea of wine country, so it came down to a choice between Niagara and Kelowna. Kelowna won. Since 2010, the competition has been held in the Okanagan Valley city, and at least year's event, the organizers announced that it would stay in Kelowna at least through 2020.

"We felt Kelowna had everything we were looking for," Chatto said,



acknowledging especially the food-savvy community that provides such a passionate audience for the event. "The community made us so welcome. And, of course, we had Okanagan College. It really hit every box for us."

The college not only hosts the black box competition, it also offers a place for the chefs to do their prep and students to help them out.

"Up to 90 students are involved in providing direct support for the chefs," said Jonathan Rouse, director of food, wine and tourism at Okanagan College. "We have students who've graduated and want to come back and participate in the championships."

In return for helping the chefs, the students gain invaluable hands-on work experience.

"It builds their confidence, so it

helps them to land better jobs in the future. And the mentoring helps, too. They're now playing on a national scene here, and that networking and action is phenomenal for them," Rouse said.

If nothing else, participating in the competition has quickly catapulted a relatively young culinary school into Canada's top tier. As Chatto said, "It's really serious work they do there. I really don't think we could have done it without the college."

The big event for the school is the black box, but there are also two other significant components to the competition: a mystery wine pairing, in which the chefs have a limited budget and limited time to create a dish that pairs with an unlabelled wine, and the gala dinner, where the chefs prepare their Gold Medal Plates winning dish for 500 people.

"We have really made a huge effort to make all three parts equal," Chatto said. Eligh admitted the mystery wine pairing will be especially challenging because the budget is so small: "From what I've heard, they allot you about a dollar a head and there's not a lot of quality protein you can get for that."

Still, it's the black box that he and the other chefs are thinking about most this week.

"It really is stressful," Chatto said.

"I think it is the most entertaining for the audience, and the scariest."

