



[SAN DIEGO FOOD + WINE FESTIVAL](#) ANNOUNCES 2025 WINNERS OF ANNUAL GRAND TASTING “CHEF OF THE FEST”, GRAND FIESTA “TACO TKO”; UNVEILS NEW JUDGE’S CHOICE “BEST NON-TACO” + “BEST BITE”

Winners Include Chef Marcus Twilegar of Cherryfish, Chef Tim Eylens of Del’s Hideout, Chef Hanis Cavin of Carnitas’ Snack Shack, and Chef Eddy Cortes of Alchemy | Choose Thy Poison

(San Diego / December 1, 2025) - The San Diego Food + Wine Festival (SDFW) is excited to share the official winners of this year’s highly anticipated Grand Tasting “Chef of the Fest” and Grand Fiesta “Taco TKO” competitions, in addition to the inaugural champions of two newly introduced competition categories at the Grand Fiesta: “Best Bite” and “Best Non-Taco”.

These annual events challenged the 2025 roster of 160+ participating top chefs hailing from Southern California, Baja, and beyond to an exciting, high-energy culinary showdown, where both Festival attendees and a distinguished panel of industry experts served as judges. Along with the cash prizes awarded to victorious chefs to support their restaurants and projects, competing in SDFW weekend competitions offer chefs a platform to showcase their unique point of view, gastronomic creativity, and honed kitchen skills to thousands of foodies.

*Grand Tasting Presented by Southwest Airlines®, November 8th
“Chef of the Fest”*

The thrilling “Chef of the Fest” competition was an action-packed culinary showdown taking place during SDFW’s keystone event, the Grand Tasting Presented by Southwest Airlines®, where chefs put their best bite forward for attendee votes, aiming to be crowned 2025 People’s Choice Chef of the Fest.

The First Place honor went to Chef Hanis Cavin of Carnitas’ Snack Shack’s “Duck Confit Toast” featuring Maple Leaf Farms duck with dried cherry jus frisée, radicchio, and orange zest toasted pistachio on focaccia.

The complete 2025 Chef of the Fest Competition results are as follows:

- First Place Grand Prize Winner
Chef Hanis Cavin – Carnitas’ Snack Shack
Duck Confit Toast featuring Maple Leaf Farms duck, dried cherry jus frisée, radicchio, and orange zest toasted pistachio on focaccia
- Second Place Winner
Chef Jason Witzl – Jolie Coronado



Couscous Salad made with grilled prawns, pickled golden raisins, whipped yogurt, and shishito peppers

- Third Place Winner

Chef Ethan Yang – Glass Box

Snapper Crudo made with local Mexican red snapper, sliced and dressed with herb-jalapeno oil, heirloom tomato chutney, and a silky harissa aioli

Chef of the Fest People’s Choice winners were awarded: \$5,000 and a commemorative plaque to First Place, \$1,000 to Second Place, and \$500 to Third Place.

Grand Fiesta, November 9th

TACO TKO “People’s Choice” + “Judge’s Choice” and Judge’s Choice “Best Bite” + “Best Non-Taco” Winners

This year’s Taco TKO Competition Presented by Euhomy, was held on November 9th at the Festival’s Grand Fiesta at Liberty Station. Over 3,000 foodies sampled tastes from notable San Diego and Baja chefs at SDFW’s flavorful finale, as well as a variety of unique beer, wine, and tequila/mezcal stations while viewing cultural Mexican art by local artists and craftspeople.

The beloved annual competition brings San Diego and Baja’s top tastemakers together to compete head-to-head for the title of Most Awesome Taco and with that, bragging rights as one of the most celebrated bites on both sides of the border. In addition to the aforementioned existing competitions, SDFW has rolled out two new categories: Best Non-Taco and Best Bite. Grand Fiesta’s esteemed panel of judges tasted their way through every flavorful entry, crowing a winner for both taco and non-taco dish. The contest culminated in one final showdown, in which the top taco went head-to-head with the best non-taco to determine the overall “Best Bite” of the Fiesta.

People’s Choice Taco TKO first place honor went to Chef Marcus Twilegar of Cherryfish’s Shoyu Braised Beef Cheek Taco. Snagging Judges’ Choice Taco TKO was Chef Tim Eylens of Del’s Hideout’s El Pato Taco. In an exhilarating conclusion to the competition series, the judging panel determined that Chef Eddy Cortes of Alchemy | Choose Thy Poison crafted both the Judge’s Choice Best Non-Taco and Judge’s Choice Best Bite with his Mini Tetela de Rabo de Toro.

The full 2025 Taco TKO + Judge’s Overall Best Bite Competition results are as follows:

- People’s Choice Taco TKO First Place Grand Prize Winner

Chef Marcus Twilegar – Cherryfish

Shoyu Braised Beef Cheek Taco featuring Brandt Beef beef cheek, shishito and burnt



pineapple pico, kimchi corn tortilla

- People's Choice Taco TKO Second Place Winner
Chef Ilean Padilla – Mexica Fé
Beef Tongue and Tuna Taco featuring La Canasta beef tongue and El Faro Seafood tuna loin
- People's Choice Taco TKO Third Place Winner
Chef Jesse Llapitan – Loews Coronado Bay Resort
Smoked Short Rib Taco featuring Brandt Beef beef
- Judges' Choice Best Taco Winner
Chef Tim Eylens – Del's Hideout
El Pato Taco featuring Maple Leaf Farms duck confit with Oaxaca cheese, poblano crema, caramelized onion, baby arugula, balsamic reduction and homemade corn tortilla
- Judges' Choice Best Non-Taco Winner
Chef Eddy Cortes – Alchemy | Choose Thy Poison
Mini Tetela de Rabo de Toro featuring masa negra infused with squid ink, filled with adobo braised La Canasta oxtail, finished with Tlaquepaque salsa, jocoque, morita oil, pickled onion, and queso fresco
- Judges' Choice Best Overall Bite Winner
Chef Eddy Cortes – Alchemy | Choose Thy Poison
Mini Tetela de Rabo de Toro featuring masa negra infused with squid ink, filled with adobo braised La Canasta oxtail, finished with Tlaquepaque salsa, jocoque, morita oil, pickled onion, and queso fresco

Judges for this year's competition included industry leaders from both sides of the border. Participating chefs' dishes were carefully narrowed down to first, second, and third place winners using a graded point system. Participants were ranked based on cumulative scores considering the dish's presentation, flavor, innovation, quality of product, and preparation in the allotted time. The judges panel included:

- Alan Bautista Plascencia - Rosarito Tourism Ambassador + Baja Culinary Fest Organizer
- Ana Ley - Sommelier
- Bill Esparza - James Beard award winning food journalist, author of *L.A. Mexicano*, + host of *Taqueando* podcast
- Carlos Gaytán - Michelin-starred Chef of Mexique, Tzucó, Paseo, Teté Cocina del Alma, Céfiro + more



- Chris Stone - Content Creator behind @sdfoodies
- Emily Brubaker - Executive Chef of Omni La Costa Resort & Spa, Winner of Season 1 of NBC's Yes, Chef!
- Flor Franco - Chef, Head of Franco Group, Member of Mexican Conservatory for UNE, + first female chef inducted to the prestigious Disciples of Escoffier
- Frans van der Lee - Cofounder, President, and COO of Chef's Roll
- Julio Marruffo - Wine Expert + Content Creator behind @wineexperiencebaja
- Rodrigo Fukumoto - Chef of Hikaru San Sushi Catering
- Romina Mendoza - Sommelier
- Suzette Gresham - Michelin-starred Chef of Acquerello

People's Choice Taco TKO winners were awarded: \$3,000, commemorative plaque, and Euhomy Ice Maker to First Place, \$500 to Second Place, \$200 to Third Place. Top honors in the Judges' Choice categories included: \$1,000, a commemorative plaque, and an Euhomy Ice Machine for the First Place Taco and First Place Non-Taco winners, respectively, and two round-trip Southwest Airlines® flight vouchers for the Overall Best Bite winner.

San Diego Food + Wine 2025 imagery can be found via Dropbox, linked [HERE](#).

ABOUT THE SAN DIEGO FOOD + WINE FESTIVAL

The annual San Diego Food + Wine Festival is an international showcase of the world's premier wine and spirits producers, chefs and culinary personalities, and gourmet foods. Held November 2-9, 2025, the award-winning festival raises funds for culinary, oenology and hospitality scholarships and grants, and has awarded over \$700,000 to individuals and nonprofits through previous events. For more information, please visit www.sandiegowineclassic.com and @sdfoodwine.

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