



Reviews



Making a lasting



Aoife Carrigy gets up close to **Dylan McGrath's** new concept restaurant, **Rustic Stone**

My editor here at FOOD&WINE Magazine has a favoured fable about Winston and Clementine Churchill. As well as being a statesman who goes down in history for being perma-soaked in whisky, Mr Churchill is the only British prime minister to have received the Nobel Prize in Literature. And if this creative talent comes as a surprise, did you know that Winnie was also quite the visual artist? Impressionist-style oil-based landscapes were his forte. He had a weakness however. Churchill found such solace and joy in his creative expressions that he found it hard to know when to stop. His faithful wife and companion Clementine had to step in time and again and – with a kind but firm hand – remove the paintbrush from the artist’s grip before he ruined his creation with his penchant for over-application.

My first thought on facing off the mammoth menu in **Dylan McGrath's** new Dublin eatery was ‘boy, this tome needs an editor’. The treatise starts well: “At **Rustic Stone** our philosophy is simple...” and then off it goes, layering on the detail in broad impressionistic brush strokes.

If you step way back the picture becomes clear. Lots of choice appealing to lots of appetites, from tempting bites for grazing and vibrantly flavoured starters through to pastas, steaks (both fish and meat) and mighty salads. There are masses of delicious sounding sides to bump up your bill with, and ‘guilt-free’ naturally sweetened desserts to twist your arm at the end of the meal. There’s nearly two dozen wines, all available by the glass and bottle (and many by the half bottle too).

But stepping back is easier said than done; I wanted to know what was on offer to me and so waded on and on through turgid descriptions of every dish, such as the bite-sized dish we ordered to keep us going whilst wading. “Big Green Olives and Grapefruit,” it begins. “Amazing green olives with segments of pink grapefruit and crushed ice made from cucumber and dill” it elucidates. “Simply freshness in a bowl.” And there was more. “Rich in iron, antioxidants, Vitamin C and E. Pure goodness for a healthy heart.” We’re nearly there now. The bottom line indicates through coloured symbols that this dish is: Low in Saturated Fat, Wheat Free, Gluten Free, Dairy Free, Vegetarian, contains a Super Food – and that Dylan himself would recommend it with a glass of No 6 (the Amphibo Lite Nature Melon du Bourgogne, no less). This manifesto translated as three fat olives served too cold to properly enjoy their juicy flesh, with a bit of grapefruit and some refreshing slush that melted before I could eat it with the fork provided. A nice idea, if not entirely living up to its verbose introduction.

Much of the meal did live up to expectations, which were appropriately high considering the main man’s achievement of scoring a Michelin star for a most unlikely Ranelagh address when heading up the late Mint restaurant. Our starter of salt cod brandade was superb: pillowy mouthfuls of salt-cured cod and potato fried in rice bran oil and wrapped in shaved ham. And fantastic value at €3.50 for three mini-croquettes.

Crunchy salad hearts (€6.75) were semi-successful. Various lettuce hearts, including red endive, bitter chicory and sweet baby gems, were filled with various dips: a cool tzatziki, a mush of aubergine caviar, and lots of samples of the rather sweet ‘range of **Rustic Stone** chutneys’. The waitress encouraged us to order bread and dips (listed on the menu at €3.25 a head). She was right that the cumin-scented hummus and sweet-spiced babaganoush bound with walnut oil were not to be missed; it was excessive to our generous order, but delicious and went uncharged on the bill. Also on the house were two sample portions of intensely flavoured and equally sweet soups: carrot with star anise and tarragon, and chilled beetroot with orange and dill.

For mains we thought we’d sample a pasta. The squid-ink linguine with crunchy fennel, raw scallops, squid rings, dill and Parmesan sounded great to me, but apparently not to the first weeks of customers, so it was gone from the

“Not everyone gets a second chance; it’s important to support those that do”

menu. We reverted to pork pappardelle (€14.95): minced pork belly in a honeyed pumpkin and sage sauce. The pasta was overcooked (as was our neighbours) and both the honey and sage overbearing, especially with all that fatty porky flavour.

We also shared a 9oz rib eye of beef (€27) with prawn glaze (a buttery herb-heavy



Clockwise from facing
 Chef **Dylan McGrath**, who won a Michelin star for his cooking at Mint; his new eatery **Rustic Stone** on South Georges Street

Hollandaise packed with curiously delicious just-cooked prawns) which is served house style on a sizzling hot lava stone. The point of this I still don't quite get. Perhaps it suits those who like their steak so thoroughly cremated they want to watch the last hues of offending pink evaporate before their very eyes. As for those of us who like ours medium rare, the waitress urged us to remove said steak from said stone almost as soon as it was set before us, and then to cook slices of it to taste as we worked our way through it. It was a good steak, but I really could have done without all the faff and gimmicks.

And speaking of faff, our brilliant side dish of truffle chips (€4.50) had to be abandoned thanks to some very silly serving vessels which prevented us reaching the delicious truffle mayo lurking in their nether regions. A similar fate was met by our polenta chips with pink peppercorns and rosemary (€4.25). Meanwhile, a superfluous dish of mixed bean salad which

came gratis from the kitchen was slightly spoiled by a slick of truffle oil. Sometimes you can have too much of a good thing.

Unusually, and somewhat incongruously, we struggled to find a dessert to over-indulge in. Most are super healthy fruit-focussed dishes. We scored high with the Catalan cassanade however: fluffy eggy warm Catalan mousse atop a sponge-light toasted brioche with a little bit of genius dropped in the middle of it in the form of a

dollop of orange sorbet. Worth every cent of its €7.95 tag.

It being a Sunday evening and us having Monday mornings looming, we sufficed with a glass of Howe Western Cape Riesling (€8.75) and another of Cahors Malbec (€4.75), each of which the waitress gallantly divided between two glasses even though we were probably the most tiresome punters she'd had all week. And fair play to her for that.

In fact the service reflected the overall feel of the place, which is a general willingness to please and impress, and an attempt to be all things to all people, as befits the prototype of a would-be chain of branded eateries. Even the ridiculous name makes sense when you consider it in a certain commercial light.

There's plenty to go back for: I want to bookend at least one meal with an order of Asian quails grilled on a stick to start and a rhubarb lullabye (rum, Absolut Mandarin, rhubarb and lavender) to finish me off.

In fairness, they've even tried to help those who don't want to negotiate the detail of the relentless menu. Specially constructed meal-deals range from the simplicity of the smoked haddock 'Superfood Salad' with a glass of Touraine Sauvignon Blanc for €23 up to the 'Pure Luxury Choice' of a T-bone steak for two with truffle tagliatelle, truffle chips, a large 'Mighty Mustard Salad' (featuring rocket, prosciutto, pear and toasted hazelnuts amongst other flavours) served with a couple of glasses of Côtes du Rhône Villages, and followed by two chocolate soup with chocolate mousse and a couple of glasses of richly sticky Maury. (All that for just €135 for two, which leaves change for a tip and a packet of Rennie on the way home.)

These deals constitute a nice idea, but one that gets lost in the mist of that impressionistic menu (or maybe that's pointillist). Which brings me back to my editor's story, and the fact that this is a menu in need of an editor, and that Dylan is an irrepressibly creative chef in need of a Clementine. On that note, ours is a country in need of positive business stories, not to mention more great places to eat. Let's hope that, with a bit of tweaking, we all get what we need. 🍷

Rustic Stone

17 South Great Georges St, Dublin 2
 Tel: +353 (0)1 707 9596
 www.rusticstone.ie

We loved The choice between pure indulgence and wholesome healthy flavour combinations

We spent €95 before service for dinner for two with a glass of wine each and a shared dessert