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Open for business

With restaurants closing, opening and changing hands, EMILY HOURICAN ventures forth to see whether the new is improved.

Rarely have I been as enthusiastic about a new restaurant as I feel about **Rustic Stone**. Although, I did approach my visit with trepidation, generated by some poor word of mouth, and fell victim to the general ignorance about the concept: "Why do I have to cook my own food? I go to restaurants so someone else can cook for me ..."

Now, in case you've been stuck in a bubble for the last couple of months, I should explain that **Rustic Stone** is the latest venture of Dylan McGrath, he who blazed into Mint restaurant in Ranelagh with huge ambitions, was the subject of a slightly disingenuous RTE documentary that made him out to be a bit of a kitchen bully, earned a Michelin star within barely a year and was clearly gunning for a second, before the recession chucked us all into a vicious blender and he had to close. This is his Phoenix-rising-from-the-ashes moment, a more mass market concept that aims to bring some of the wonder of Mint to a wider audience, at a price that more of us will find bearable. Not that **Rustic Stone** is cheap. It isn't. But it is well within the average range, and given that McGrath was offering starters for about €35 on the Mint *à la carte* and is now plating up for as little as €6 or €7, there has clearly been an ocean of change.

Now, let's get the not-so-good stuff out of the way first – the name makes me think of some awful pseudo-Celtic theme pub, the tables for two are too small for the many dishes that arrive with even a standard order, and the menu is a bit of a mess. Initially, it seems hopelessly confusing, cramped, subdivided into nine different categories (not including wine), and marked with a dizzying array of tiny symbols that relate to the food content. Low saturated fat, wheat free, dairy free, gluten free, vegetarian, superfood and sugar free all have their little indicators, plus one called DC, or "Dylan's choice". Then a chirpy member of staff pops over to explain it, and I wonder why I should need a menu explained – and then the penny drops. In fact, you can mix and match easily between the categories, substituting "bites" for starters and "salads" for mains as you wish.

Once that wobble was out of the way, I realised that the menu has tonnes of dishes I'd love to try. Green olives with pink grapefruit

and crushed ice made from cucumber and dill, carrot broth with star anise and tarragon, sweet chilli peppers stuffed with tartare of tuna and avocado ... Clearly, this was going to take more than one visit to get to the bottom of it all. The interior is (very) vaguely Eastern in theme – think uncluttered, light wood, not huge golden Buddhas – and presentation of food is extremely pretty.

That first trip – with a tech whiz kid who is food-obsessed and occasionally deigns to explain the finer points of iPads in return for the chance to be a glutton in good company – we ordered crab mayo on

toast with torn herbs and wheatgrass (me, €8.95), luscious lime salad (him, €6.25 for the starter portion), boisterous beetroot salad (me, €7.75, starter size) and, because we kind of had to after all the fuss, fillet of beef with tarragon and mushrooms (him, €29). This duly arrives on a smooth round stone heated to *blah* degrees, and you then remove it either immediately for rare, or leave a while longer depending on your preference. After all the fuss made about this, and the crabby denunciations of "gimmick!", it's actually perfectly simple to get your head around, and even makes sense. The proof of the pudding is, of course, in the eating, and Tech Kid pronounced himself more than happy with the results: "There's not a whole lot that can be done with fillet steak, but this is very, very good."

I took his word for it, being far too busy with my crab mayo and beetroot salad to be sampling steaks. The crab was good and tasty, with plenty of flavour and no nasty gritty bits, and the beetroot salad truly fantastic. The freshest, zingiest, most beautifully conceived thing I've had in a long time. Incorporating shaved fennel, baby gem lettuce, avocado, radicchio, chicory, pink grapefruit, pink radish, dill, beetroot and caramel pine nuts, each element remained separate yet blended, working hard in perfect harmony, but without falling into a general mush. Top marks. The Tech Kid's lively lime salad, which I finished up for him, was equally fantastic.

We didn't plan on staying for dessert –

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lack of time rather than inclination – but then I bumped into Dylan himself and he insisted on sending over “something really quick, to try”. After a couple of minutes, the two blondes beside us were delivered delicious-looking bowls of brightly-coloured something, which they polished off with glad cries. We waited a bit more and eventually, I spotted Dylan, chilling out after service, and explained that we were

too rushed to wait any longer. “Did you not get your desserts?” he looked horrified. I, recalling the cries of delight from the blondes, was even more so.

The good news? Those ladies booked back in the same evening, with a large party. And I have returned twice since then, and am thinking of taking out a **Rustic Stone** loyalty card. With superfoods tasting this good, who needs multi-vitamins?

