

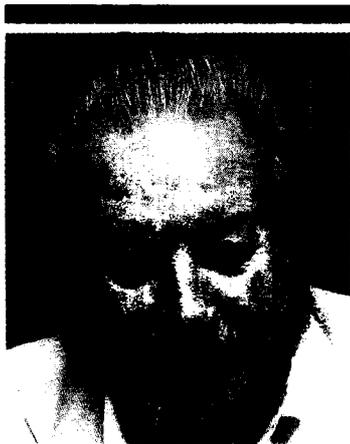


Rustic Stone

17 South Great
Georges Street,
Dublin 2,
Tel: 01-707 9596

SIZZLING WITH SUCCESS

Giving steak
the hot-stone
treatment proves
a winner



Paolo Tullio

Long ago, in a world where restaurants were places you visited once a year, there were no full-time restaurant reviewers like we have today. In those far off days, jobbing journalists took it in turns to go out for a meal and then they wrote about their experiences.

I began to take an interest in these reviews back in the 1970s, and discovered that the basic format went a bit like this: "I asked for my steak well done and got it medium," or sometimes, "I asked for my steak medium and got it well done". Essentially, that was restaurant criticism, because steak was pretty much what everyone ate when they went out for a meal.

Times have changed, restaurants have changed and tastes have changed, but the Irish love affair with a slice of beef continues unabated. It would be a brave chef who puts a menu together without a steak choice on it. Perhaps this is no more than a recognition of the fact that Irish beef is undoubtedly very good.

So if you were starting up a new restaurant, the sensible thing would be to take the Irish predilection for beef into account. Which is precisely what Dylan McGrath has done in his new restaurant, Rustic Stone.

But before I tell you about that, let me tell you about a trend that I've noticed. The new austerity has changed our dining habits. Where once no price was considered too much, now we look for value. Chefs have responded to this by changing what they offer. Many fine chefs are now serving bistro food at bistro prices.

Thomas Haughton, ex of Harvey Nichols, is the chef at Pinot's; Stephen Gibson, ex head chef of L'Ecrivain, is chef in Pichet's; Troy Maguire, ex of Locks, is chef in Copinger Row; Padraic Hayden, ex of The Dylan, is chef in The Camden Kitchen. I could go on, but you get the point. Dylan McGrath's new venture puts him firmly within this trend.

Rustic Stone is on Georges Street, where Soho used to be, on the corner opposite The Central Hotel. I arrived early for dinner with Bairbre Power and the restaurant was already very busy. We got a table on the ground floor and were handed menus. The menu is a large, double-sided stiff card and it does have a lot of information on it, creating a food faddist's delight. Every dish is marked with a combination of symbols, each one signifying either low saturated fat, wheat free, gluten free, dairy free, vegetarian, super food or Dylan's choice for wine.

The food choices are broken down into sections: bites, which cost mostly less than a fiver, for grazing on; starters, which are more substantial; five pasta dishes, and, last, eight 'on the stone' dishes.

This brings us to the USP of Rustic Stone. What makes this restaurant unique is its use of lava stones — discs of black stone some eight inches in diameter and two-inches thick. These arrive with your 'on the stone' choice and are pre-heated to a high temperature, allowing you to cook one of six steak or two fish choices to exactly the point you like, at the table. I was intrigued and so was Bairbre, so we both picked 'on the stone' dishes.

The back of this menu continues with salads, side orders, desserts, Dylan's choices and a short wine list. This last comprises nine whites and nine reds, plus two sparklers and three dessert wines. Every wine on the list can be had by the glass, by the half carafe, or by the bottle. We chose a half of the Salice Salentino from Leone de Castris, which our waiter told us they imported directly. It turned out to be a well-structured wine, nicely balanced and easy to drink.

To start, Bairbre chose the crab mayonnaise, which came on thin slices of toast. I'd picked the Asian quail, marinated in soy and grilled on a stick, like a kebab. The crab dish was truly delicious: the crab meat was mixed with mayonnaise, infused with herbs and finished with wheatgrass, which the menu explains is a 'superfood'. The quails

were pretty good too, and the kebabs came with radish, mango slices and cucumber.

Good sourdough bread accompanied our starters, which had given us a glimpse of the culinary skills McGrath is famed for. And that's a point to bear in mind if you're going to be eating 'on the stone'. Since you'll effectively be doing your own cooking, you'll need to look elsewhere for McGrath's work, and you'll find it in the starters, the side dishes and the bites. You'll find interesting uses of flavours and cooking methods, and some that are very unusual.

Our main courses arrived on wooden boards that carried the hot stone, a side salad and a knife attached magnetically to the side of the board. Bairbre had chosen a rib-eye steak and I'd picked the rump steak, which came with basil and pine nuts. We also had a dish of truffle chips to share. Both of these mains were already sizzling on the very hot stones. If you're planning to eat like this, don't wear a white silk blouse as you will get spattered with flecks of sizzling fat.

Obviously when you cook your own steak you can have it exactly as you like it, and I had mine pretty rare. Bairbre found that by cutting her steak into slices, she had better control over the cooking. There's something quite enjoyable about eating like this — it becomes a more interactive experience. I enjoyed the novelty of it and I suspect, given

the Irish love of steak, that McGrath may have hit on a winning formula. The bill came to €109.40 without service charge and included €5.50 for two teas which we didn't have. Memo to self: I must check bills in future. ☺
email: paolo@independent.ie

ON A BUDGET

The Rustic Stone doesn't have a set dinner or an early bird, so you'll need to pick from the standard menu. Some of the bites are less than a fiver and a couple of the starters are just over, and you can have a full-sized

pasta dish for around €15, which would give you two courses for about €20.

ON A BLOW OUT

On the back of the menu, in the section headed 'Dylan's Choices', you'll find the 'pure luxury choice', which is T-bone steak for two with truffle chips, truffle tagliatelle, a mustard salad, two chocolate mousses and two glasses of Côtes du Rhône Villages — yours for €135.

