

My mother's death made me WISE UP

His fiery genius couldn't save his Michelin-starred restaurant, Mint – but MasterChef judge Dylan McGrath says his inspirational mother gave him the reality check he needed to turn his career around. By Eoin Murphy

It's a clammy Wednesday evening in Dublin and two figures cast an evening shadow at the pedestrian crossing in Ranelagh village. One is MasterChef judge Dylan McGrath, who paces the footpath nervously outside Dillinger's restaurant. The second is me, the red-faced interviewer, who is trying to find out how long we will have to wait for our table. The casual-dining eatery was once the home of Mint restaurant, Dylan's epicurean playground, which both made and broke him in the three short years he manned the kitchen.

Already several diners have clocked the chef, skulking outside the front window waiting to be seated, and necks crane from behind menus to catch a glimpse of McGrath's return to Mint. In 2009, Mint became one of the first restaurant casualties of the recession, but at the time there was little sympathy for the chef. And for over a year, little was heard of the West Belfast man. It could be argued that The Pressure Cooker, the 2008 RTÉ TV documentary that charted his hunt for Michelin recognition — and portrayed him as an angry young man in relentless pursuit of perfection — is the reason behind that. But it is now 2012 and Dylan is a very different person; in his own words, he is a man. 'I was rendered as some madman, roaring around a

kitchen,' he says. 'I wasn't mad: I was a kid, and I just didn't know why I was doing what I was.'

McGrath was out of work for 18 months after Mint closed but is now finally able to move on from the memories. Sitting in Dillinger's bustling square dining room, he scans the interior with a wry smile. 'They've dug down to give them higher ceilings,' he spots. 'That's clever.'

'It's brought back a load of memories,' he continues wistfully. 'Some good, some bad, but I definitely have a lot more clarity now. It was a very raw and creative time in my life. Deep down, though, from the moment I opened the doors, I questioned whether Dublin could sustain the sort of cooking that I wanted to do. Mint certainly couldn't sustain it as a room — it

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH: FRAN VEALE; STYLING: GRACE CAHILL; MAKE-UP: STEPHEN KIRBY; DYLAN WEARS SHIRT: £150, BY GIVÉUS & HAWKES; TROUSERS: €220, BY LANVIN; TIE: €125, BY DOLCE & GABBANA; AND BOOTS: €325, BY PAUL SMITH; COVER IMAGE: DYLAN WEARS BLAZER: €815, BY GUCCI; JUMPER: €250, BY ARMANI; AND TROUSERS: €330, BY DOLCE & GABBANA



didn't deliver on the luxury other restaurants could. Whether I could deliver the experience that would create the repeat business necessary to allow the spend it required was something I knew deep down wasn't possible. But it didn't stop me from making the effort. We did everything in our power to bring those customers in. I mean, the service was definitely at the races.'

A waitress approaches the table and smiles at Dylan. 'I worked for you here for one night,' she beams, before taking our order. We share a plate of ribs, scampi and crab as McGrath reminisces. 'It was an unfortunate experience for anyone to go through, although I consider myself very lucky,' he says. 'It's taken me a long time to figure out what success is. I remember being asked once by a very successful entrepreneur and potential investor, "What do you really want out of life?" and me not being able to answer him. And he said, "Dylan, unless you have the vision and can see yourself in that house, driving that car, married to that woman, you won't get it." And he's right: if you don't have the vision, you can't see the journey. Success for me is about balance, and having people in your life that you care about. To have a job that you are happy to go to, but also to have people on your day off that you are happy to spend time with. A woman you wake up in the morning with, that you want to be next to. That's success, and I didn't have that or see that back then.'

'We are two men sucking on ribs having a serious conversation,' he continues. 'That's why this place is packed on a Wednesday night. I couldn't do that in Mint.' In fact, it took a pilgrimage to the three-Michelin-star restaurant Jean Georges in New York before McGrath finally understood the problem with fine dining in Ireland. 'I was in there on my own and I spent \$900 [€735]; I had two glasses of Champagne,

four glasses of wine and a tasting menu,' he says. 'I looked across the restaurant and near the door was this guy, and beside him a woman with the biggest fake breasts I'd ever seen. But he was asleep, snoring away in the chair. And something occurred to me: this was his dinner. I was going back to Dublin, where it isn't dinner — it's the meal of the year. And that's the difference: New York has a population that can sustain that. Mint was always supposed to be a stepping stone for something else. The unfortunate thing for me was when I was about to make the next step, the world went "crash".'

When the property market sank, businesses like Mint were the first to go to the wall. As the Celtic Tiger cubs ran for cover, Dylan was left high and dry — until he was extended a lifeline to relocate Mint to the five-star Ritz Carlton in Powerscourt, Co. Wicklow. A deal that lasted all of two weeks. He recalls, 'I shook hands with a person in the Shelbourne Hotel, for an investment of €0.75m, to move Mint.' But it never happened. McGrath believes that, behind the scenes, financial advisers were advising against the deal, 'because the world had changed. Had Dublin been New York, we would have gone onto bigger and better things. We would have got two stars and taken it forward from there, but we weren't and instead Mint closed.'

Dylan is keen to move on from the past and while the lessons have been hard, they have certainly been learned. He has a rapier wit and a wickedly dry sense of humour. Sitting across from me in a tailored blazer and white designer T-shirt, the 34-year-old is a businessman who is as much about the numbers as the food he serves. In the three years that have passed since Mint closed down, much has changed in his life. The most significant event was when his mother, Mary — his inspiration — passed away last

Did you know?

Dylan is so proud of his role as a mentor on MasterChef Ireland that he is encouraging RTÉ to produce a children's version of the popular cookery competition





Simmering tension Above: Dylan with his MasterChef co-star, Nick Munier (left), and last year's final 16 contestants. Right: The chef with his ex-girlfriend, nutritionist Erika Doolan, who helped him design Rustic Stone's menus

December after a long battle with cancer. Dylan spent several months with her before she died and is thankful for the time he had with her. 'The only thing that I could do, because my mum was sick, was to step back,' he recalls. 'I drew the blinds. I sat down and screamed, "Oh, my God, they have taken my work away." I was angry and I felt as if I had backed Ireland and Ireland had pretended to be richer than it was and there was no foundation to the country.'

At the same time he was offered a job at the Michelin-starred Alinea restaurant in Chicago but turned it down to be with his mother. The experience rooted him in Ireland. The anger he'd felt as a brash young chef was replaced with a thirst for knowledge. His ego well and truly in check, McGrath searched for a formula to get back in the market, before settling on the concept of good, nutritious, affordable food that became the hallmark of his current restaurant, Rustic Stone, on Dublin's George's Street. 'Rustic Stone was a reality check and I learned to adapt,' he says. 'It was a lesson from my mother. She said I had to change with society, come up with something fresh and new, or I was f****d — although she phrased it a bit better. It was she who gave me that clarity. I had to say goodbye to the scallops, the foie gras and the foam because this isn't about the work; it's about staying alive.'

Still, Dylan's eureka moment was an unlikely one. 'You're going to laugh at this,' he grins. 'I was sitting at home watching a movie where Puff Daddy says to Biggie Smalls, "Unless you can play it on the radio, we aren't going to make any money." It was at that moment I realised that I needed to know how to get to the masses without sacrificing my standards. It would still be interesting and modern. With the raw menu, I was able to offer something new, tasty and healthy. Whether people want to admit it or not, they count calories. I do that for them.'

Dylan had help designing the raw concept in the form of nutritionist Erika Doolan. She convinced him to include the nutritional information that goes into the menu at Rustic Stone. The pair dated for over three years but are no longer romantically involved, although they enjoy a professional relationship and Erika still has an input in the health-conscious menu.

Rustic Stone's huge success has allowed McGrath to take on his most ambitious product yet — Fade Street Social by Dylan McGrath.

Work has already begun on the 8,000 sq ft premises just off George's Street, the goal of which is an all-inclusive dining experience: a gastropub, tapas bar, restaurant and cocktail bar all under one roof. 'I don't want Fade Street to be judged on Mint,' he says. 'I am so proud that I can walk around Rustic Stone and know I have a restaurant that serves 300 people on a Saturday. And the proudest thing is that I see six girls from the Southside, 10 girls from the Northside and eight businessmen from Spain all sitting in the Stone eating together. I've never seen that inclusivity in Dublin before. I want to be able to put everyone together under one roof, and I don't give a s**t what you earn. Is that going to pay the bills in a gastronomic restaurant? No. Am I going to be able to meet all the criteria that Michelin require in that space? No. I want to do restaurants that allow me back to cooking in a free way that is not a massive amount of pressure on my brain every day. It will allow me to be happy in the work.'

Dylan's newfound serenity was most evident last year when he returned to our screens on MasterChef Ireland, this time as a supportive judge. This was as much about letting his critics know he was back in business as it was about supporting the Irish food industry. 'You can't be a leader without being correct,' he says. 'You have to be a follower before you can be a leader in the same way you have to be an apprentice before you can be a mentor. With MasterChef, I was presented with a bunch of amateurs but I was going to show that there was an essence to my correctness. And I wasn't just barking mad or lying about what I could do. It was important for me, for my character, to redeem myself, so that I could move forward in business.'

He and his onscreen partner Nick Munier have just begun filming the second series of MasterChef. And while Dylan has definitely chilled out, his standards have by no means dropped. 'I'm looking for a higher standard of cooking, a bigger programme, because we need to push the boundaries in a way that wasn't done in the last one,' he says. 'It needs to be bigger and better. I'm looking for both Nick and me to be completely about the food, no bulls**t. And I am looking for more people to tune in than last year.' Naturally. As with everything McGrath does, it's onwards and upwards.

MasterChef Ireland returns to RTÉ this autumn





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