



RSVP

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CELEBRATED RESTAURATEUR AND MAITRE D' NICK MUNIER AND MICHELIN-STARRED CHEF AND RESTAURATEUR DYLAN MCGRATH DISCUSS BEING JUDGES ON RTÉ'S MASTERCHEF IRELAND, BEGRUDGERY IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY, THEIR GENUINE FRIENDSHIP AND HOW TO PICK YOURSELF UP AND START ALL OVER AGAIN.

It's a format that has become successful world-wide, so when RTÉ was searching for judges for the Irish version of MasterChef, Nick Munier and **Dylan McGrath** were the perfect choice. Both experts in their fields with colourful and often controversial personalities and a wealth of experience between them, they have been good friends for five years, which adds to the on-screen chemistry.

Known best for being maitre d' of Hell's Kitchen, Londoner Nick, 43, is married to Denise, and has three sons, Conan, 14, Luc, 6, and Alex, 4. Having worked with Marco Pierre White for ten years, he opened his restaurant Pichet with chef Stephen Gibson last year, and it has been very successful. He is also a well-known artist.

Currently single, Dylan, 33, grew up in west Belfast. Following the closure of his restaurant Mint in 2009, for which he won a Michelin star, last year he opened a more casual restaurant, **Rustic Stone**, which has been very well-received.

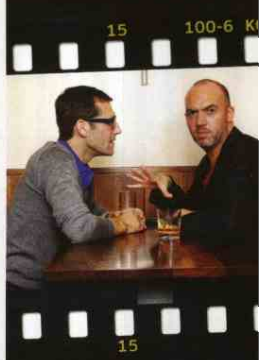
RSVP met with Nick and Dylan at the Fitzwilliam Hotel in Dublin to discuss MasterChef, fiery temperaments, stress levels in the kitchen, media stirring and the notorious rivalries between chefs.

Closing Mint must have been very hard for you Dylan? How did you cope?

Dylan: It was very difficult. Anyone who knows me and what I did in Mint, and saw how I behaved when I was in there will know that it was a real labour of love. I really fought every day to keep it consistent and one star wasn't enough for me. No sooner do you get what you want, than you want more. I didn't know how else to evolve but to continue to be creative and try to make it more profitable and move the business forward – Mint was always supposed to be a stepping-stone. Like any labour of love, it was difficult to have to close its doors and say that it wasn't going to work. There was no point in putting any more money into it if it was dead in the water, or if Ireland wasn't going to allow me to move and make a profit that would allow me to put it in a better location. I explored every avenue and completely exhausted myself to try and step it away, but it was just the wrong time.

What do you think went wrong for you?

Dylan: The whole country was scared and customer spend



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dropped. I've heard other restaurateurs say, "What do you mean, you always had a customer who spent €50-60?" but I didn't. I had a customer who spent €150-200 plus, so their dinner had better be perfect and the wine that was put with it had better be exceptional! I used to think like a chef but I've learned a lot now. Once they took away my work, the rotten IMF and NAMA, it was about how do we push food forward in Ireland? With **Rustic Stone**, my new restaurant, I've invented something that has no formality, no preciousness and is a really commercial business. It's about being casual and being full all of the time, and it's kooky and fun and relaxed. And it's funny but there are so many more of those types of people around than there are the people who came to Mint once a year.

We see **Rustic Stone mentioned in the social pages quite a lot. It seems to attract quite a few model types?**

Dylan: Well I designed it for women. I really think it's women who pick restaurants, not guys, so you've got to make them very feminine-friendly. It's all about healthy eating and you can be good or bad in Rustic. So you can have a burger and truffle chips and chicken wings, but you can also eat very healthily as well. I was very blessed when I closed Mint to be able to stand back and have the clarity that was needed to be able to open something else like this.

After the Michelin experience, are you happy with the kind of work you're doing now?

Dylan: The thing is that customers change direction. Michelin used to be where it was at, and I'm not saying there isn't a market for expensive, innovative food. There will always be Prada and Gucci and Lamborghini, but at the end of the day, customers come first and it's about how they feel when they come into a restaurant. I couldn't invent **Rustic Stone** until I started thinking like a customer rather than a chef. If I was still thinking like a chef, I'd be in trouble. I have people eating in Rustic four and five times a week.

Are you happy with the way things have worked out?

Dylan: I will get back to my work one day, but in the meantime, it's pretty good and I'm enjoying what I do. I don't work as hard as I used to, because I don't have to. Everyone cooks their own meat on a stone. I get up every morning and I run, and then I spend all day in the business. It's one of my concepts but there will be other concepts. Myself and Nick both worked at such a high end and consistency was the key. I notice when you go to the bottom end, that isn't as consistent. That's why we're trading so well because we offer very good value for money and the standard is consistent. Customers are responding phenomenally well to it.

When you said the restaurant was designed to be attractive to women, was that deliberate as you're single?

No I never drink in the restaurant – well it would be very rare! I don't eat there because I don't really want to run restaurants where people see me sitting there the whole time socialising. Like if Nick comes in, I would have dinner with him and that would be fine, or I would go to Pichet and he would sit with me because we're such good pals.

Being a chef seems to be a sexy occupation. Do women fancy you because you can cook?

Dylan: Not really, no. I don't think so. I don't know why women are attracted to me, it's a difficult thing to answer.

Maybe it's because you're gorgeous? Why are you still single?

Dylan: You're making me blush now. I'm not ready to settle down yet. I was in a relationship for quite some time, and we're still amazing friends and we speak most days. You just get to a point when you know when you're ready. Nick has children and stuff but I'm not ready for that yet. I want to develop a lot more and put more security in my life. I want to have other restaurants and come up with other concepts, and give it that commitment for quite some time. I have always been very driven, and I don't want to lose that and dwindle into something else. I think that by the time I get married or settle down, I will have gone back to the work that I left. There is a lot of creativity in me, and what is important now is that I stabilise my life. To understand one type of cooking is not enough to be a good chef.

Nick, MasterChef isn't the first time you've been involved with television. You had TV cameras following you for months when you were in the process of setting up Pichet. How does it compare?

Nick: I enjoy the whole process of TV. Well when I did the fly-on-the-wall series, I wanted to showcase that anyone could follow their dream and fulfil it. And in a way, I was hoping that someone in MasterChef would

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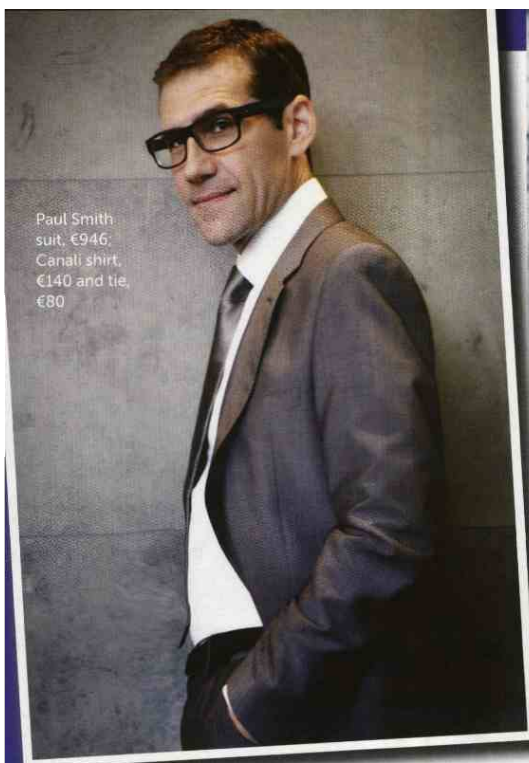
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Paul Smith suit, €946; Canali shirt, €140 and tie, €80



I KNOW MY FOOD IS COOKED PERFECTLY AND I KNOW MY STAFF ARE PERFORMING AND THE ATMOSPHERE IS GREAT. THAT'S WHAT GETS ME UP IN THE MORNING!

want to change their life around and follow a pursuit in food that they never had the opportunity to do before. You can only do that if you have the passion, will and drive. It's all very well cooking at home, but to come into a hot, stressful environment is different, although I think the shouting has gone out of kitchens these days anyway. We were trying to showcase to the candidates that you will succeed in food if you really are passionate about it. For example, we took on a guy in Pichet who was a banker who had done a cookery course. He's been with us now for the past year and a half! I think the 16 people we chose for MasterChef were the right people from the candidates.

What was it like working with one another on screen?

Dylan: It was a great honour to be part of such an international brand, and I would always be careful about what TV I do. Nick and I have known each other for five years, and we sat down and made a decision about what we wanted to achieve from the show. We're friends and I've never been competitive with him. Contrary to what people may think, I'm the least competitive person around. Because we get on so well and are such good pals, when they put us together it was very easy for us to click with one another. He can be a bit prickly and so can I, and he's always getting into trouble and so am I. We don't give a sh*t as long as the people we care about and love are okay.



Nick: Dylan is one of those unique characters and he reminds me of a young Marco. He has the sixth sense of a good chef. We're two friends who love what we do, and we were very fortunate to be asked to audition for this fantastic programme. We get on great - we were born on the same day, which helps! August 4th, exactly ten years apart. What you see on screen is two natural guys, judging food and trying to nurture 16 contestants who want to succeed. I think the programme showcases the best in Irish produce and locations around the country. The production around it was fantastic so everything seemed very natural and not contrived, and we felt that being part of it was a great achievement. We had a good time doing the show and I think it comes across. We always said that it wasn't about our personalities; it was about what was on the plate.

J. Lindeberg jumper, €110, and polo shirt, €75; jeans, Nick's own; Kurt Geiger shoes, €245.