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Masterchef Ireland





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The judges from MasterChef Ireland, Nick Munier and Dylan McGrath, sit down with RTÉ TEN's Alan Corr. It is lunchtime in Dublin's Pichet restaurant and Nick Munier knows exactly what he wants. "The quail please", he says and sets the menu down, already looking satisfied. Beside him, Michelin-starred chef Dylan McGrath nods his approval but opts for butternut squash risotto. When the food arrives, both men, professional and highly regarded in their field, or kitchen if you will, set about their food with what can only be described as passionate gusto. And yes, they do talk with their mouths full. You might say they look like they enjoy their jobs. Immensely. Given that Munier, who's previously worked with the Roux Brothers and Marco Pierre White, and McGrath, who used to run the Michelin-spangled Dublin restaurant Mint, this is indeed a compliment to the establishment.

Just as well really as Munier is Pichet's co-owner. They're quite a team. Munier (44), who was memorably christened the "Thunderbird" when he was the maitre d' on Hell's Kitchen, has a boyish enthusiasm and a perma smile while McGrath (34), who earned some less than flattering nicknames on RTÉ shows Pressure Cooker and Guerrilla Gourmet, wears a scowl and talks about cooking like it's a military operation behind enemy lines.

They will make a bit of an odd couple when they step up to the tasting table as judges on MasterChef Ireland. Their brief is to dice with the culinary dreams of the hundreds of Irish men and women who have applied for the prestigious title. They decide who gets the chop and who cuts the mustard, in the country's biggest amateur cooking competition, with a grand prize of €25,000. For the next six weeks, we'll see 16 cooks battle it out in the highly pressurised MasterChef kitchen under the watchful eye and tastebuds of Munier and McGrath.

Over 1,000 people applied and just 50 were chosen to compete for a place in the final 16. It's been a long summer for the judges; they've spent the past two months tasting, rating and diplomatically berating amateur cooks from all over the country.

"There were some freaks there alright!" says Dylan, chugging great glugs of olive oil and balsamic vinegar onto a plate and mopping it up with crusty bread. "It's like The X Factor and that guy who comes on and says he's going to sing Eye of The Tiger – dah! dah da da! And his mum and his dad and his uncles told him he could sing, so he's full of confidence. It's a bit like that, there are people who came on thinking they are just brilliant chefs."

Munier is a little gentler: “The amateur talent we saw on the show was very high”, he says. “We were very pleasantly surprised and I think that people still have to eat to live, but I think they’re a bit more aware of quality products and trying to achieve good dishes at home and trying things out.”

The heats are likely to get very hot indeed but will the judges be playing good cop, bad cop? “I was conflicted cop actually”, says McGrath with a grin. “Nick was just a swine and once a swine always a swine! Hahaha! We tried to be sincere and honest and talk about the good and not perform to the camera. We wanted the contestants to win. It’s not about me and Nick. We’re there as professionals, we know where we’ve come from and what we think about food and it’s funny how much on the same page we were.”

McGrath and Munier have known each other for five years. “We had planned to do something together for years”, says Nick. “We’re both kinda very high end guys. Nick worked at the high end for a long time, so did I”, says McGrath. “You work at the high end in London when you’re dealing with perfection, not everybody can do that but me and Nick always got on, always had chats, always considered the possibilities of working together and then Ireland went bust.”

Quite. McGrath is referring to his tenure at Mint, the Ranelagh establishment where he successfully worked to achieve the holy grail of a Michelin star. It was no great surprise that he did but in the process, the former bad boy of the Irish culinary world earned comparisons with Gordon Ramsay for his brusque approach in a high pressure environment. “I love to work but you do put yourself under a huge amount of pressure. You either enjoy that pressure or you don’t”, he says. “Cooking needs that kind of pressure, if you’re trying to get consistency from a very complex product every day you have to be on your toes and everybody else needs to be on their toes. You’re running a race and you see it as a race and a race doesn’t last forever. The unfortunate thing was that Ireland went bust and I ran out of time.”

Facing up to the realities of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, last year he opened The Rustic Stone, just around the corner from Pichet. There, he trades successfully with less gastronomic exactitude and a more accessible and competitive menu. He has also mellowed a lot. “Completely. I’m not under the same pressure, I’m not doing the same job, I’m not running the same race. I do miss the race. I really do, but I know I’ll return.”

Munier left school at 16, went to catering college in Germany before working with the Roux brothers in London and went on to manage the restaurant at the K Club. He then became assistant manager in Marco Pierre White’s two-Michelin star establishment in Hyde Park. His love affair with Ireland continued when he met his wife Denise O’Brien from Clondalkin during a brief (two week) spell at Conrad Gallagher’s Peacock Alley in Dublin. He opened Pichet two years ago and within six months it was rewarded a Bib Gourmand by the esteemed Michelin Guide.

He also worked for a while in U2’s Clarence Hotel and the co-owner was a regular in the restaurant. “Thursday night was the boys’ night out when they used to come to the Clarence a lot”, he says. “They were always very nice and the drink sales would go up because no one wanted to leave. God was in the room. Bono used to always eat off the menu but sometimes he’d want something plain like fish and chips but he’d always have a good bottle of wine.” Not wanting to be left out of the celeb hobnobbing, McGrath chips in, “I got a kiss off Sienna Miller for dessert once. Of course I stank of garlic and hadn’t washed.”

Back to the matter at hand – MasterChef Ireland. Each cook will have 55 minutes to prepare and plate up on the show and our judges aren’t afraid to break hearts and shatter dreams. “This is the thing. It was tough, very tough, because you get to know their personalities and they’re passionate and they wanted to impress us”, says Nick. “It was hard for us because some days we had to make that tough decision and say unfortunately one of you is going home today. There were tears and that was just us! It was tough having to let someone who was so keen to stay go. Don’t forget you’ve got the cameras on them and you’ve got the pressure of cooking for us.”

McGrath says he is not a fan of cookery shows on TV and indeed paid very little attention to what his counterparts on MasterChef UK do. “We’re our own people”, he says. “I think you’ll find that MasterChef Ireland is quite different. I’m not a big fan of cookery shows. I think enough about food to be sitting at home trying to learn ideas from Nigella.”

However, one thing McGrath and Munier do have in common with their UK colleagues is the fact that they consumed huge amounts of food every day during filming. “At the finals of MasterChef Ireland there were nine courses and I actually felt self loathing coming on”, says McGrath. “So I have spent the last two months running every morning. Me and Nick also play tennis together every Friday.”

So just what is the culinary equivalent of a badly sung Eye of The Tiger? “We’ve seen some crazy stuff”, says Dylan. “Let’s just say there were some disasters, some misconceived monstrosities that were about people having more belief in themselves than actual ability. One contestant made strawberries, onion, pork and bean dumplings which is a marriage I found difficult to manage.”

“I took one for the team”, says Nick with a grimace. “Dylan refused to eat it. He didn’t need to – he just saw my face. He had the ambulance on speed dial. A lot of people thought that what they were producing was what we wanted to eat and because they overcomplicated by thinking about what was going to impress us, it didn’t work. That’s not what it’s about. It’s about taking the ingredients and making a simple tasty dish but half of them just went berserk and did these obscure, mad things. This is a show about being yourself.” McGrath nods in agreement and then it occurs to him as he makes very short work of his risotto: “Here, do I have to pay for this?”

Alan Corr