



WHAT'S ON TV

NEW SERIES **MasterChef** TUESDAY 6TH SEPTEMBER, 9.30PM, RTÉ TWO

After Dinner's Mint

Dylan McGrath

After unsuccessful stints in more than one catering college, **Dylan McGrath** decided the best way to become the top chef he could be was by experience, so blagged his way into a job at Jury's Hotel in Belfast at the age of 18. In a miraculously short time (thanks to his brimming confidence and falsified qualifications), he was made head chef. He realised that if he could achieve this while only 18, the sky was the limit.

He spent the next several years in numerous restaurants around the UK, honing the "military precision" required to become a Michelin star chef, before opening his own place, Mint, in Dublin in 2007. Mint soon became the toast of the culinary scene, hailed as "the most exciting place to eat in the country". Eventually the recession forced Mint to close its doors for good, but Dylan went back to the drawing board and opened **Rustic Stone** - a far more casual establishment than Mint - in the city last year.

We caught Dylan while he was on a fact-finding mission visiting restaurants in Portugal - hard life! Over a glass of wine and a beef sandwich, he told us of his expectations of the MasterChef contestants as well as his thoughts on the science of food...

It's here! As MasterChef Ireland kicks off on RTÉ this week, we chat to judges Nick Munier and Dylan McGrath about their joy in honing amateurs' skills as well as the fun of two old culinary companions working together at last.

Interviews by Doug Whelan

TVN: One thing we always ask chefs, Dylan, is do you find it important to be able to switch off from "chef mode" to be able to simply enjoy food for what it is?

That's a good question, [thinks]... For me there are four types of food. There's the food I eat for energy, that makes my arms and legs move. Then there's the food you eat in a restaurant when you're there just to eat and have a nice time. Then there's

Dylan: "MasterChef is a different type of programme that I don't think Irish TV has seen before"

eating at a high gastronomic level. That's when you're eating to learn something. You're considering the dish as a complete interpretation from start to finish. That's Michelin star type stuff. Then there's the food I prepare myself, where I'm tasting it and

asking does it have enough salt, lemon, this, that. After a certain time, you will develop the ability to imagine how something tastes without actually tasting it. That's how different types of food work for me.

TVN: Well then, it sounds like you're the perfect man for the job as MasterChef judge. How have you found the experience?

Well, we had a great time making it for one thing. There's a lot of TV I don't like doing but MasterChef is a different type of programme that I don't think Irish TV has seen before. Plus, with MasterChef, there are two things going on. Nick and I get on well. I get on with most people. Regardless of what they say, I'm quite easy to get on with! Part of the show is about the dynamic between us;

Get in the Kitchen

Pichet Away!

Nick Munier

Front of house master Nick grew up helping his parents at their guesthouse in Kent in southern England, which gave him his first taste of what would be his career in service. Catering school led to him honing his craft at some of the finest restaurants in Britain and Ireland, including the iconic K Club in Co Kildare and a long-lasting partnership with Marco Pierre White at his various restaurants; Nick became something of a celebrity when he became Marco's on-screen maitre d for Hell's Kitchen, and soon he knew it was time to strike out on his own.

Eventually settling in Ireland and starting a family, Nick opened his own restaurant Pichet in 2009 on Trinity Street in Dublin. The restaurant was an overnight success, Nick says he hopes the area, a cluster of narrow streets in the heart of the city, will become a hub for high quality eating in the next few years.

TVN: Firstly Nick, tell us how you found the experience as Ireland's first MasterChef judges.

We got the easy job I think! We were there to judge food and to showcase Ireland's best amateur chefs; the pressure was really on them! We were eating all day and just had to decide which was the best! No, I'm joking of course. It's a great thing to be a part of. To be honest, when it was kicking off we were concerned whether or not we would get the level of talent we were hoping for; as it turned out, we were spoilt for choice right

Nick:
"If I got a call from some of them looking for a job I'd be happy to hire them"

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if that wasn't there, it might not have worked. That's what works on the UK show, the two boys get along and there's a rapport and respect between them.

TVN: How did you approach your judging of the contestants?

You know, it was weird for me. Mint was a highly regarded, very gastronomic, very expensive restaurant, and

when Ireland went bang I went with it. For the year-and-a-half then when I was coming back, I stood back looking at where Ireland was and what customers wanted. So we went a certain way with **Rustic Stone**, but MasterChef is a different thing again. It's not like they're preparing a three-star Michelin dish and you're about to dissect every minute detail and tear it apart. We

WANT these guys to win.

TVN: But surely you're used to a higher standard than a lot of the food you saw at first?

A lot of the cooking in the early stages was pretty bad, yes, but at that stage it wasn't specific dishes we were looking out for, it was whether this person had the talent in them where they could take the journey, so to speak. Could they develop and

become the chef they could be? They are amateurs, but do they have the instinct and the talent to potentially be the winner?

A lot of the entrants came along because their mums, sisters, husbands, whatever, were telling them they were really good; we'd have to tell them they weren't. Then some were coming along because they wanted to know if they could really cook. This was an

from the start. Everyone who was there really wanted to win, and that was quite refreshing. There were some very different types of talent too, though. There were people who thought they were a lot better than they were; there were those who had some talent but not a lot of confidence about their ability. We also found a lot of people who hadn't got a lot of practical skill, but had a fantastic 'instinct'. There were some then who really stood out in all areas. The final 16 we chose all really deserved to be there.

TVN: Did you find it hard eliminating contestants or did you have leaders all the way through?

Oh, it was like a rollercoaster ride! Those we really thought would shine would have really bad days. Then those who were maybe the weaker ones of the group would have amazing days and really come out shining. We would genuinely be wondering ourselves, my God are they going to make it? It was really hard for us to let people go: what if the weaker chef one day wasn't going to blow us away the next? Put TV cameras on top of them and when they've only got an hour to cook something, that just added to the pressure. Then there's presentation on top of that. That's a lot to be dealing with.

TVN: You're a front-of-house man as opposed to

Dylan's Michelin star chef. Did your expectations and demands of the contestants differ?

My approach comes from whether I would be confident serving a particular dish in a restaurant. In other words - would my customers be happy? That's as opposed to



Dylan eats up his new TV role

opportunity for them to find out. Some of them were really ambitious. It was interesting to see them go through these stages of reality, finding out that yes they are as good as or even better than they thought they were.

TVN: Do you get a kick out of finding those particularly talented ones?

In a way. We really wanted to

Dylan's expectations, which were on a more technical level. At the same time, we tended to be in agreement about the fundamentals – if it's good it's good, if it's bad it's bad. That was the bottom line.

TVN: Is this the first time you have worked together?
Well, this is the first time we've

Nick gets some food for thought on the series

worked physically together. We've done stuff in the past in terms of discussions about food and the business and so on; in fact, we almost opened a restaurant together, but it never came to pass sadly. It's nice to finally get to put our heads together like this because we've been friends for years. It was important that we have fun doing it as well – I hope that comes through on screen.

TVN: All the contestants are amateur chefs with other careers already. The eventual winner aside, do you see a future in the industry for other contestants?
The thing with this programme is that it will mould you and give you the confidence to try and break into the industry. I do hope at least a couple of them give it a try. Certainly if I got a call from some of them looking for a job I'd be happy to hire them.

TVN: So was this series really 16 sneaky job interviews for your restaurant?
[laughs] Well, maybe five! **TVN**

encourage them to go after it; but also we didn't want people coming in being really blasé. That's not the type of person you want. Once we got it down to the 16 finalists, we saw some amazing work being done because not only did they deserve it, but they really wanted it too. It makes for really good TV, I have to say.

TVN: Being from different sides of the business, did you and Nick have any difference of opinion in your expectations of the contestants?
Genuinely, no. What's good is good. I would look at it slightly differently than him at certain points, but if the sauce is split it's split. If the meat's cold it's cold; if it looks and tastes brilliant, then the eyes have it. **TVN**