

Dylan's pressure cooker

He's no Mr Angry, but chef Dylan McGrath, who has just been awarded a Michelin star, enjoys a sprinkling of the F-word . He tells Barry Egan about being binned from a catering course, how he slept on the floor of his restaurant Mint in its early days and how he's 'crazy passionate'

By Barry Egan

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HE is more like Gauguin than Gallagher -- [Conrad Gallagher](#) . You expect him to be able to (bohemian) rhapsodise about spinach or some such. He doesn't do bland sentences (or, I daresay, dinners.) He keeps his hand on top of his head the entire time we talked: surreal wouldn't quite do him justice. He was named after [Dylan Thomas](#). And frankly, it shows. Dylan McGrath is spiky and fresh, like red chillies thrown on a salad. He uses the F-word like others might use black pepper. You don't really expect Michelin- star-winning Irish chefs -- Dylan won his the other week -- to use strong Anglo-Saxon in interviews. Expect the unexpected with Dylan McGrath.

He says in the early days of Mint, his restaurant in Ranelagh, he used to sleep in the restaurant. Sometimes, still, he says, he is so busy that he sleeps upstairs above the restaurant. I believe him. He has a kind of hiply dishevelled look. It suits him, the hot-tempered new star of RTE's new show Pressure Cooker. He doesn't suffer fools gladly, you get the impression. He threw some guy out last year "for being a pr**k", he says. "I have f***ed a number of people out. Some guy was rude to the staff. I could tell he was just being a pr**k."

He talks openly about his famous temper. In fairness, I gave him plenty of opportunity for him to blow his stack and it never happened: I missed my plane and stood him up on Saturday, then when I rang him to apologise he was fine; then when we rescheduled for Monday morning he misheard me and turned up on Sunday instead. So he is not Mr Angry.

"I am very passionate," he says. "I am very focused on my cooking. When things go wrong I definitely get upset. My temper is natural. I do have to keep a curb on it."

I say that I know Richard Corrigan and I have never seen him lose his temper. Someone like [Marco Pierre White](#), however, would be likely to throw an axe at you.

"I'd be closer to the axe," he says when asked to describe his personality traits. "I don't like things to go wrong. There is a temper -- and I'm not happy with it all the time -- but when you're working very, very hard you get frustrated when people don't live up to it. A lot of it is to make the kitchen work."

"I went through a lot of chefs here in the space of a year and a half. A lot of my kitchen are French, Spanish and Portuguese. They are hungrier. It is like the working-class boxer. That sort of underdog hungry. That's the sort of guy who sticks it here. The guy who wants to listen to the radio, he doesn't last two minutes."

Fittingly, there is no radio in the kitchen at Mint. He says there is no room in his kitchen for spoofers. "There is room for six guys to stand in -- and if you can't keep up, you're out."

He adds that he doesn't sack people -- "they just tend to go" of their own volition "pretty quickly". Equally, if you can stand the heat in Dylan's kitchen, "there is a great sense of achievement, but it is pain for the first couple of months," he says, before the 30-year-old bizarre new king of Irish cooking, corrects himself, "Not pain, but certainly a struggle. But to come out the other side is quite rewarding for the individual."

He certainly does a good talk. What inspired him to go into cooking was not food as a child or anything so conventional: he talks instead of ambition as what drove him into culinary arts. "Ambition. Ambition."

"Then I became fascinated with food and why it works and how it works. I am a real workaholic. I had to work at it," he says. "It didn't just f***ing happen over night," he says. He is top of the pots now, feted and swooned over by diners, restaurant critics and those people at Michelin alike.

He was born in Dublin's [Rotunda Hospital](#) but raised in West [Belfast](#) with a brief interlude in Carlow until he was seven. "I was raised on the Falls Road," he says. "There was no police on the street. You came from a world that was run by the IRA, completely. There was no parking tickets or TV licence men." When he was 17, he got away from West Belfast and went to Portrush Catering College.

"They quickly kicked me out after a couple of weeks," he laughs (at least I think it was a laugh -- Dylan is such a Byronic burst of broodiness that you can never be quite sure whether it is a scowl or a sneer beneath the surface). "I didn't handle discipline too well. It is funny that now I am so disciplined and that I want discipline from people, but when I was younger I would have been the opposite. I had a bit of a problem with authority."

After being chucked out of Portrush, he tried another catering course in Belfast with slightly more success. He was, however, too rock 'n' roll to fit in. "I was very talented in the kitchen but I just didn't want to sit down and answer a load of f***ing questions about stores and whether salmon is an oily fish. Do you know what I mean? I just wanted to be more stimulated." That soon came with

his first job at Jurys in Belfast. With characteristic arrogance, and elan, he says he went in there when he was 18 as a lowly chef and "became the head chef within about three weeks. And I couldn't even cook!"

He sounds like some autistic boy-genuis and he doesn't disagree. "That does sound familiar. Because it is very hard to say how those things come about, you know -- where you have 10 chefs and you are 18 and there are guys cooking for you longer than you are alive." Seeking to better himself as a chef, he struck out for London. He decided that "Michelin was the way to go, because they obviously have the best restaurants." Mediocrity would have been death to Dylan. He worked at Tom Aikens in Chelsea when he was 26. "We were the seventh-best restaurant in the world. Tom was a huge influence on me."

"This is my first place," he says of Mint now. "This is a start for me. Coming to Ranelagh from London and wanting to build something and getting a star really quickly was amazing." Michelin have a criteria that we won't know or never see written down, they are very evasive about what qualifies as a star, he says. He adds that when you look at the Michelin star restaurants in Ireland -- Chapter One, Kevin Thornton, Patrick

Guillbaud, l'Ecrivain and Bon Appetit; all in Dublin -- "it certainly suggests a lot about the food improving in Ireland, but all those restaurants are unique on their own terms."

"What I produce here, comes from me. It comes from what's in here," he says tapping his heart. Equally, he says, there are certainly restaurants that charge a lot of money for a very mediocre product. "That's quite fascinating really. But that's the way of the world. People sometimes just want a big juicy steak. And are prepared to pay whatever, once they are sitting in the right luxury."

Dylan, like those two other Dylans -- Thomas and Bob -- has scarcely got a conventional bone in his body. Even the simplest questions are greeted with philosophical pauses that last a small eternity. He admits he doesn't listen to music, read, watch TV, go to the movies -- he says he doesn't have time. "I am always in the kitchen" Do you have sex, Dylan? He laughs. "Yeah. Every chance I get."

The Lord Byron of Ranelagh cuisine is single and not in any long-term relationship. Dylan doesn't, naturally, have time. He doesn't give his heart away easily, if at all. He doesn't have a landline phone at home. He is off the drink at the moment. When you give yourself to your work, he says, your life becomes your work.

"I am quite mad," he chirrups.

How does your madness manifest itself?

"It belongs in the kitchen. It is safe in there. I can keep it in there and it is forgiven in there."

"People say I'm intense, but genuine and honest. I hope I've integrity and I hope I can hold onto it. I am what I say I am. That's for sure," he says flashing me a rare smile.

And what do you say you are?

"Exactly what I say I am," he says with an even bigger smile. Asked how women who've gone out with him in the past have described him, he uses two words: "Incredibly passionate."

Then a pause, and two more words are offered up: "Crazy passionate."

"They are fascinated a lot of the time. I don't really get heart-broken. I'm very secure. I'm solid. I might sound arrogant -- I've been called that a few times ... " (No shit, Sherlock ...)

"I'm 30 now and I am hoping that it will start to balance out, but I want to stay very much inside the kitchen," he continues. "I am not a chef that is going to step off the stove, regardless of how much TV or whatever comes my way. It has still got to keep the integrity of the cooking and keep inside the kitchen. I don't think it is possible for a man like me to continue on unless I do that."

But what is a man like Dylan McGrath, precisely?

'Pressure Cooker' will be shown on February 4 at 9.30pm on RTE One

Marco Pierre White, page 6

- *Barry Egan*