

If you can stand the heat



TV Review Hilary Fannin

Pressure Cooker
RTÉ1, Monday

Life in Cold Blood
BBC1, Monday

Ashes to Ashes
BBC1, Thursday

Science Friction
RTÉ1, Tuesday

Viewers are advised there will be strong language from the start... "You are a f***ing w***er! You are a f***ing tit!" Is it f***ing pipeable? Is it?" Apparently, about 200 kitchen staff have been trialled and rejected by chef Dylan McGrath at his Michelin star-winning restaurant, Mint, since it opened in the decorous Dublin suburb of Ranelagh less than two years ago. Two hundred - my my, is that all? *Pressure Cooker*, an entertaining if mildly disturbing fly-in-the-soup documentary, followed McGrath in the run-up to this year's Michelin awards, revealing a driven, emotional and caustic man who learned his trade by being pilloried and abused in British celebrity kitchens, a lesson, it seems, that he is passing on, with interest, to his beleaguered and nervy Dublin staff.

Winning a Michelin star is obviously a mighty difficult task, and Mint's achievement, in January of this year, brings to just six the number of restaurants in Ireland which can claim the honour. McGrath's precocity, belligerence and originality have been chewed over in the Irish media ever since he arrived back from London in 2006 and proclaimed his Michelin ambition. Since winning the star his profile has been, well, prolific, a fact which left *Pressure Cooker* in a bit of a pickle: we already knew McGrath had won, and we knew that those at the tighter end of the luxury food market had been a little sniffy underneath their floppy caps, muttering about consistency and tenacity and long years of slaving over a hot clientele, the prerequisites deemed necessary for achieving such an accolade.

Yet, despite having all the tension of a collapsing baked Alaska, the programme did manage to reveal something of the darker side of celebrity cheffery and to offer a taster of the madness that can prevail in the pursuit of "high-art food" (the kind of food that one critic, rather dismally, admitted is "stuff a lot of people don't like").

This film was never going to be about the food; it was about the man. At one point, McGrath was (somewhat daringly) asked whether winning the coveted star would make him happy; in answer, the chef, a culinary equivalent of Roy Keane (tenacity bordering on psychotic disdain), walked away, seemingly overcome with anger, or sorrow, or maybe just the vicious pain of wanting something so badly it hurts, yet realising that no trophy will ever satisfy a self-driven manic perfectionism.

Pressure Cooker threw into question the whole notion of culinary stardom and its collateral damage around the chopping boards, a kitchen-sink TV format personified by Gordon Ramsay, who looks like a mewling pussycat next to McGrath.

Maybe for McGrath, a Belfast boy brought up on sausages and brown sauce (and, for a



treat, Andrews' Liver Salts stirred into the orange squash), displaying a temperamental artistry is all part of the fun, a payoff for surviving the vicious environments created by his former employers, which he compared to "being in the trenches". It is a persona which undoubtedly brings notoriety and attracts newly minted gadabouts, with their body-shapers and shady capers, to his expensive table. To give him his due, McGrath, in the face of a somewhat curmudgeonly community of critics and fellow chefs, didn't bother pretending to be likable.

"Don't whistle," he admonished a uniquely relaxed worker in his kitchen. "This is not a f***ing building site." Quite.

Above: Dylan McGrath, a driven, emotional and caustic man consumed by a manic perfectionism.

