

Minted

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Being granted a Michelin star when you've been in business just over a year is a remarkable feat. Dylan McGrath of Mint did just that.

It's a question that's worth asking - what makes a great chef? Obviously, a finely honed palate, a mastery of technique and flair are prerequisites, but the culinary world is filled with chefs who have those attributes yet remain little-known and under-appreciated. Something else is needed - a spark, a determination to succeed and above all else an ability to transmit passion onto a plate.

These are not the characteristics of an everyman. Skill, determination, flair, proficiency and hard work are the characteristics that bring success in any chosen profession, not only in the culinary world, and just as in other fields, the number who rise to the very top are few.

We're quite new to celebrity chefs here in Ireland; on the continent they've been around since Escoffier at the end of the 18th century. But have them here we do now, on television, on the radio and in print. They're as much household names as the politicians who misrule us and the sportsmen who entertain us. Of this small group - mostly Michelin-starred - the newcomer is Dylan McGrath of Mint Restaurant in Dublin's Ranelagh.

It's one of those effects of our mass media that he's probably better known for his appearances on TV than he is for his cooking, which is simply because more people watch television than eat in Mint. That's a pity because television isn't always an undistorted mirror on reality. Earlier this year, McGrath came to the nation's attention with an RTÉ documentary about his quest for a Michelin star. It caused a stir because McGrath was seen giving a waiter a hard time due to his perceived shortcomings.

I won't regurgitate any of the more lurid headlines, but the gist of them was much the same. He was a cruel taskmaster, a monster to work for, a demon incarnate in the kitchen. It made a great story, but how near the truth was this?

McGrath came to Dublin just two years ago in April 2006. Oliver Dunne, another talented and Michelin-starred chef, had just left Mint to open his own restaurant, Bon Appétit, in Malahide. Dunne had called McGrath in London, knowing that he was keen to get back to Ireland, to ask if he wanted to work with him in Bon Appétit. McGrath had other ideas. Realising that Mint was now without a chef, he called Mint and a new partnership was born.

I ask him why he wanted to make the move. "I'd been working with Tom Aikens for years and I felt it was time to make a start by myself. I wanted to get back to Ireland, but I didn't really want to be working under yet another chef. That's why I went straight to Mint. I met up with Dunne to explain what I'd done, but I don't think he was too happy about it. I just liked the idea of being independent at last."

McGrath got his wish, and so began his tenure in Mint. He brought with him all the skills he'd learnt working with Aikens and to the surprise of many of us who commentate on the catering world, Mint didn't disappear when Oliver left, it stayed at the forefront of gastronomy with the new boy at the helm.

Right from the outset, McGrath looked like a man who was going places and a Michelin star granted in just over a year was a truly remarkable accolade. Many chefs work for years to get one and I don't know of any other chef who's achieved one so quickly.

"The star was a huge thing for me, it was international recognition. I took a real chance making that TV show - if I hadn't got the star it would have been a disaster, but I did, so it worked out well, thank God."

So why take the risk? "I knew we were doing good food and we'd got good reviews for what we were doing, but I needed more people to know about us. Mint is a small restaurant - just 35 covers and we have 23 staff - so it can only work financially if we're full."

Running so tight a ship goes a long way to explaining his management style. What he does is insanely work intensive, each dish takes many man-hours to prepare. His diners are expecting to get the very best on their plates and McGrath has no intention of letting them down, so any weak link in the chain can expect short shrift.

"I took a trip to San Sebastian and did a gastronomic tour. I ate in restaurants with huge resources - places that had 30 chefs working in the kitchen - and I'm thinking 'I'm in Mint with just six chefs. How can we ever get to that level here in Ireland?' In Mint we have absolutely no room for f*** ups, with so few chefs. My management style is no different from Marco Pierre White's or Gordon Ramsay's. Football managers work like that as well - you f*** up and you're out. The team I have now is dedicated, hard working and passionate. They're committed to quality."

That may sound harsh, but in a business where you're only as good as your last meal served, it's a line you need to take if you want success in a hurry. I ask him if he had considered chasing two stars. "Maybe, who knows? Kevin Thornton showed us that an Irish chef can do it, but to do it you need resources.

"One day I'd like to make some money and hopefully it'll be here in Ireland. I have an idea to maybe open concept restaurants, where I can bring quality to a mass market. It's been a hard ten years. I've had moments of self-doubt, but I believe I've created a destination restaurant, one people will seek out for good food."

I'd agree with that assessment. I also suspect that no matter what the future of gastronomy in Ireland may be, we'll hear plenty more about Dylan McGrath.

This article first appeared in Irish Director magazine.

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