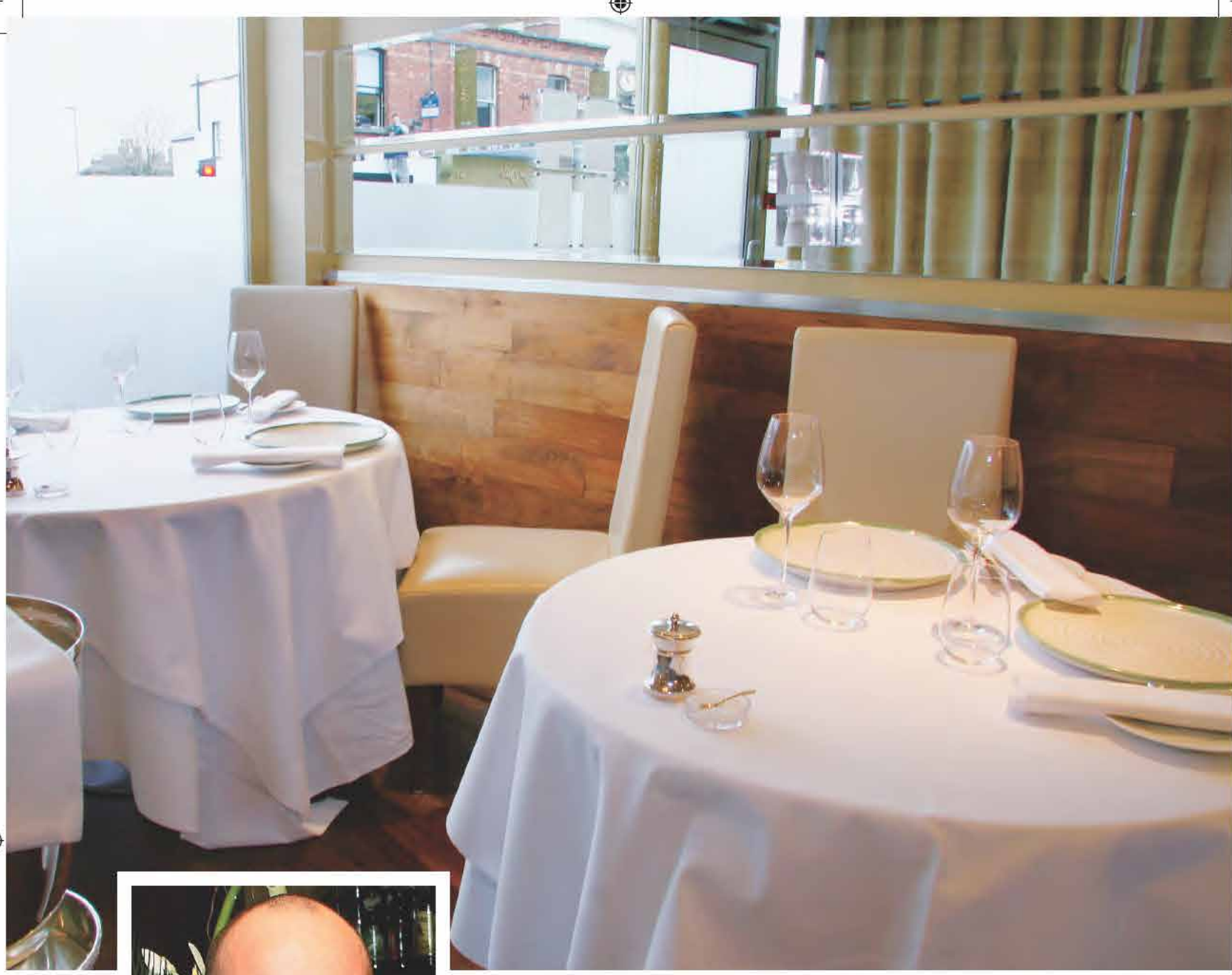


MINT condition



Corinna Hardgrave on tantrums, terrines and the making of a Michelin star

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It's not what you'd expect in a restaurant. After a good thirty minute rendition of Hell's Kitchen -style f'ing and blinding overheard through the walls that protect the diners from the chef, the noise level in the little dining room kicks up to an oh-my-God-he's-really-kill-ing-them notch, only to be interrupted by the strident holler of an ambulance. And it's coming our way. The lights progress from Chelmsford Road, blaze through the two frosted windows of Mint, the whole

room goes quiet, there's not a peep from the kitchen and we watch as the lights come to a halt by the restaurant side door. Is it the chef or his sous? Is it a stretcher or a chair? Please tell us, is there any blood? But all is well in the kitchen of a thousand knives and it appears that we will not be enjoying our fifteen minutes with Charlie Bird recounting the events of the evening. It's probably just a neighbour who can't take any more of the swearing.

Our meal is wonderful; we leave with yet more Dylan McGrath stories and a slight uneasiness about the sanity of this culinary magician. Me? I like my artists raw, just on the right side of tortured, preferably at the point before the ear becomes dispensable and plops into the court-bouillon. And Dylan McGrath, the head chef at Mint fits the part heroically. He openly admits to going through ten chefs a week in the early days at Mint. Having met the original Perfectionist, Bernard Loiseau, at his famous Côte d'Or restaurant in France many years ago, and found his questioning about how I enjoyed his food to be on the charming side of reasonable, and having subsequently read of his suicide, I tread carefully when

writing about passionate chefs with insatiable ambition.

But six months later, things have changed. Dylan, with a face made for TV and soulful brown eyes, has thrown himself at the mercy of a TV documentary crew and they're shadowing him, recording him, editing him. He is what they call "great television". More than a pretty face and acerbic tongue, you will know that McGrath is now the proud owner of a coveted Michelin star. The Oscars of the culinary world. You may have to wait months for a booking in his restaurant (even Sienna Miller had to wait a night for a table, yes, Dylan did get to kiss her, albeit in front of Rhys Ifans), and he might just be the hottest date in town (Trevor White, who knows a babe magnet when he sees one, is already doing a "d'ya wanna be in my gang" dance at his restaurant door).

So enough about idyllic Dyl. What about his food? Well some would have you believe that it depends which side of the culinary fence you're on: unfused food versus molecular malarky. But this, as far as I'm concerned, is to totally miss the point. So I bring along a number of potentially

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restaurant review

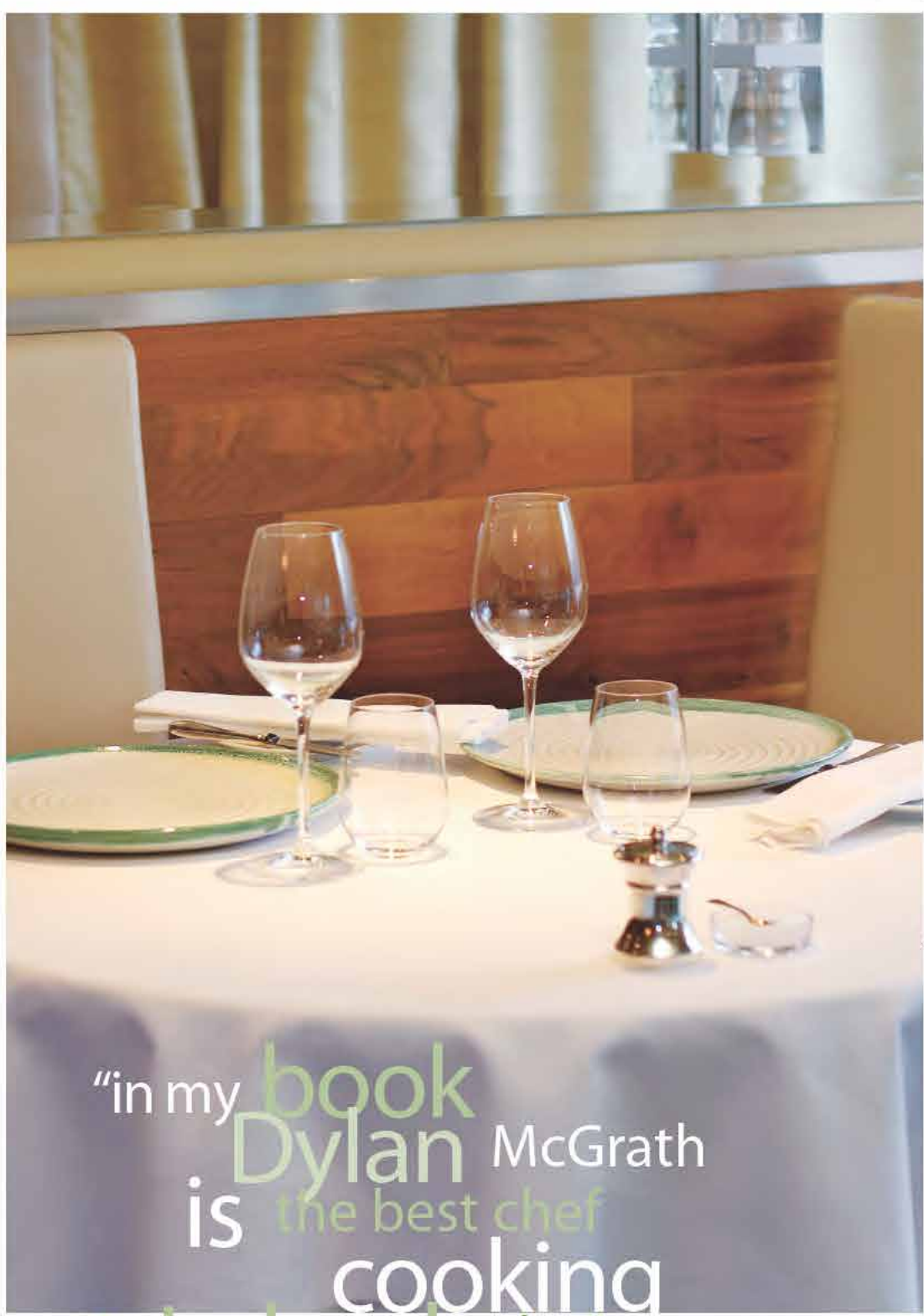
dissenting female voices on my next visit to keep me on the culinary straight and narrow.

Dylan is looking relaxed as we walk through the door. "Shouldn't you be in the kitchen screaming at people like a proper chef?" I ask. "I've got a good team in place," he smiles, the Jimmy Nesbit accent sending excited Dyl chills up the spine of every female; he flashes the big browns around the room, strides into the kitchen and we sigh, now that's what we call an appetiser. We settle into our table which is barely elbow space away from the table beside us. This is not the best room in town.

Our amuse-bouche arrives: three beautiful Japanese-style dishes with the most sensuous treats you could imagine. We work through the layers of perfectly pitched textures in each pot. A brandade foam hides an avocado purée which has an incredible sweet/sour balance and is followed by a layer of red pepper jelly. Another pot has a tomato gazpacho foam, fennel cream and a basil and fennel jelly and the last pot has a hot foie gras mousse, diced truffled potato and is topped with a foamed potato soup.

Our appetiser follows: a cassolette in a white asymmetrical bowl. It is a delicate, savoury custard which has its origins in Japan but the taste is solidly French. A celeriac foam yields to a custard made from langoustine stock which is lifted with chervil and the result is sublime. And then on to our starters. They range from €26 to €40 for the langoustines which I cannot resist. My outlay is repaid with two enormous, perfectly roasted langoustines served with a sharp kick of apple purée. On one side is a piece of Jubago and on the other, apple sheets cover two cubes of pork belly. Three perfect cubes of warm apple jelly punctuate the presentation and a warm apple juice is poured over at the table and finished off with Jubago oil. This is a perfectly resolved dish which manages to tie all of its elements together. There's clarity and a great burst of flavour. The other starters are equally good. The roasted scallops (€30) are served with a warm skate terrine and confited duck, the dish pulled together by the unifying flavour of a balsamic shallot sauce in each component, and the beautifully plated, poached, wild salmon (€27) which is served with pickled golden beetroot and paper thin slices of marinated cucumber is a lesson in restraint; the raw, fresh flavours ringing through.

The côte de boeuf for two (€80) is one of the more expensive mains, but a finely constructed dish. On the plate is a deliciously sticky piece of pressed slow-cooked flank, bone marrow with sea salt, a crispy beignet of escargots, and exquisite, bright green, parsley gnocchi; and the large rib of rare beef is carved and served table-side. A menagerie of pots includes a red wine sauce, parsnip purée, and mashed potato with a potato soup foam on top.



The serving is unbelievably generous, nearly enough for four.

An apple themed pre-dessert with layers of jelly, purée and sorbet arrives in a kiln jar and is followed by a passion fruit dessert (€22) which is as witty as it is wonderful. A passion fruit shell is filled with delicate coconut cream and mango purée to resemble a boiled egg and coconut tuiles pose as toast. On a separate plate, two ravioli made from slices of mango are filled with passion fruit tapioca, a bright yellow passion fruit sauce is spiked with the cooked black seeds of the fruit and a coconut froth drifts ethereally across the top of the dish.

We finish our meal with lollipops made with popping candy, froths, sorbet and secret centres and we're smiling with delight.

The lady at the table beside us remains on the other side of the culinary fence. She thinks the food is pretentious and it's just not her thing. She has eaten in some of the top restaurants in the world, and has run a leading restaurant in Dublin, so her point of view is valid.

But my mind is not changed. In my book, Dylan McGrath is the best chef cooking in Ireland today. Despite the fact that Michelin have deemed him worthy of one of their accolades, I believe that the food is way beyond one-star level, and although it may appear expensive, he's working to some of the tightest margins in town. Go now; give your senses a treat because with this talent he may soon be in a room few of us will be in a position to afford. ☑

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