

'One week working in Mint ended my love affair with food'

Budding chef Frank Armstrong recalls his torture working alongside Michelin chef Dylan McGrath

RTE's documentary *Pressure Cooker* last week gave an interesting portrait of Dylan McGrath, the *enfant terrible* of Irish gastronomy and the country's newest Michelin-starred chef. I enjoyed my own direct insight 18 months ago. After a summer of leisurely cooking and continental gastronomic sampling, I naively decided to embark on a career as a chef. Already, I had uncovered the mystery of preparing gnocchi and could make fresh pasta in my sleep. Cookery books were my reading staple.

At 30, undoubtedly I was too old for the profession but blithely reckoned I could handle the work. I had no experience and the positions advertised all sought two or three years' experience. Undeterred, I applied for one post which seemed to hold out hope for the uninitiated. "Are you a foodie? What is your signature dish? What months are figs in season?" I felt I handled these questions with scholarly aplomb.

The next day, surprisingly, I received a phone call. My age was not well-received and I was economical with the truth regarding my 'experience', exaggerating a few days' work in London as an impoverished dishwasher where I had risen to the level of blow-torching peppers. I was told that it would be bloody hard work but I said I was prepared for that. Unbelievably, I was asked to come in to Mint the following Tuesday.

Start chopping

On the day, I was greeted by Dylan's glowering stare, a mixture of intimidation and compassion: "So you want to work in my restaurant? We are trying to create the best restaurant in Ireland and we work f**king hard. Where's your uniform?"

"Uniform?" - I had none. I had taken the precaution of bringing one of my mother's best knives but this appeared faintly ridiculous beside the arsenal of metal the other chefs were slashing about with. Immediately, I was issued with instructions. "Get some shallots and start chopping." The shallots I was accustomed to were small, similar to garlic, rather than the larger restaurant variety: I could not locate the shallots.

"Get some chervil?" I knew of chervil but,



Frank Armstrong (LEFT) outside the Mint restaurant in Ranelagh, where he worked under chef Dylan McGrath (INSET) for one gruelling week

inside the walk-in fridge, I had no idea what precisely it looked like beside all the other, unpackaged herbs. It is remarkable how one can sweat in a fridge.

All morning, in the tiny confines of Mint's kitchen, I tried to make a good impression. "Move! Move! Move!" I was told, besides far more salacious exhortation. By midday, I couldn't wait for lunch break, but it never came. I kept my head down, peeling what was put in front of me and frantically running around on the orders of the chefs. At last, I was taken outside for a pep talk.

Dylan had strangely kind eyes for such a fierce character. "You have the right attitude but you aren't working fast enough - you have to work faster." "Yes, chef," I replied. "Chef" was unlike any boss I had experienced; his authority was more like that of an oriental ruler of lore.

The morning's hard work was a mere prelude to the real pain. Service! I was at the beck and call of all the chefs who

ordered me from fridge to freezer and then to dry stores. By the end of the day, I knew the meaning of back-breaking work.

As the week went by, the chefs around me began to greet me with more than a contemptuous grunt. I was becoming a veteran. Most new chefs didn't last the day. Only a chef who really wanted to learn from a master could possibly endure the working hours and the invective. I was asked to

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work longer hours as my body adjusted to the labour - but Dylan and the other chefs were working far harder than me, arriving before 8am and only finishing late at night.

There were many terrible moments. Worst was the pain of squeezing the razor-sharp legs of crayfish for the slightest of morsels of flesh contained within. My fingers pricked with a thousand cuts; all for the filling of a few pieces of ravioli that were doubtless gobbled down in seconds.

By the end of the week, I had come to realise I could derive no satisfaction from work of this monotonous cruelty. I felt a certain macho pride that Dylan urged me to stay when I announced I was leaving, but this kind of acceptance came at too great a price. I had fallen out of love with food.

I have never before seen such feats of strength and endurance as I witnessed in that kitchen. A lasting image is of two chefs hauling a giant stock pot, like ants scurrying along with burdens three times

their weight. But I felt most sympathy, and respect, for the kitchen porters. Dylan, wisely, tended to avoid haranguing these prized assets - smiling Mauritians and stern Chinese, whose hands seemed desensitised to heat, grasping saucepans that would make me yelp with pain.

Dylan McGrath is an artist, and predictably ruthless in the pursuit of his creations, but unlike the work of a painter or a writer, the chef-artiste relies on the collaboration of his team. Dylan expects the same inhuman level of commitment from his staff that he imposes on himself, and this kind of work can only destroy a person.

The food he concocts is a visual extravaganza - Jack Yeats on a plate - and he provides an almost intoxicating array of tastes but I could never again bring myself to enter Mint's front door. Like some magnificent edifice created by cruel labour, for me a meal there could only conjure the brutality of its creation.