

Cooking a storm

Aingeala Flannery was loath to try out Mint, but glad she changed her mind

I BOOKED Mint as soon as news broke that Dylan McGrath had been anointed with his first Michelin star. I wanted to cancel it when I saw the documentary about his mission to impress the guide's notoriously finicky inspectors. McGrath has tested and rejected hundreds of applicants to work in his kitchen; those who make the grade are pilloried as "dickheads" and "tits". If what I saw on my telly is to be believed, the carry-on in Mint is the stuff of industrial relations nightmare.

"I'd rather eat my own arm." I told the Gentleman Caller, "than give money to Dylan McGrath. He's a raging carbuncle on the bottom of the sous cheffing underdog." "Trade unionists don't eat foie gras for fear they might like it," he replied. "You, my darling, are paid to eat, not to bleat... so let's get on with it."

Our reservation was for 6.30pm, with the proviso we'd clear off by 9pm. I'd have thought the vulgar practice of packing two sittings into an evening was beneath Mint, but apparently not. McGrath, it seems, has graduated from The School Of Hard Knocks with honours in economics.

They were so intent on moving things along that my gin and tonic aperitif was accompanied by an elaborate amuse bouche involving three little pots of technicoloured foam, cream, jelly and powder. There was potato soup with foie gras, gazpacho with fennel, a smudge of avocado in mousse set with jellied red pepper. At Mint, nothing looks like nature intended; textures are deconstructed, which seems to intensify the flavour. Even the bread was astounding.

So far, so fabulous... and we hadn't even got to the appetisers. The menu is brief and varies according to season and availability.

Forget concessions to populist tastes – the starters were foie gras,



DELICIOUS: Dylan McGrath's Mint really does deserve its Michelin Star but don't go if you expect a 'good feed'

frogs' legs, salmon, langoustine or scallops. I opted for the latter, which were roasted with a caramelised finish and soft pulpy core, served with moist, flavour-some duck breast and a terrine of skate with balsamic reduction – an intriguing creation. The texture was almost nutty, the flavour sweet, and without a menu I'd never have

guessed the ingredients.

We decided to drink wine by the glass and abandoned the extensive list, asking our head waiter for recommendations. With my scallops, he prescribed Gruner Veltliner Wechselberg 2006 from the Austrian producer Birgit Eichinger. To accompany the Gentleman's salmon, he suggested a wonderful Leonardo Pieropan Soave. The salmon was poached, but had the texture of the finest gravadlax, so soft it seemed to dissolve on the tongue. The predominant flavour was of dill, mixed with the freshness of cucumber. With creamy avocado, orange zest and vibrant beetroot juice all playing a role, this extraordinary production was as explosive on the palate as it was on the plate.

We were entirely seduced by Mint, although not everyone will be. It's not a place for a "good feed", there are no sides, the food is

served as McGrath envisages it – a performance that the audience is invited to consume, not to rewrite. Mindful of his apparent grumpiness.

The Gentleman's loin of lamb, served in juicy pink slices, was the most visually appealing dish either of us had ever clapped eyes on – a cobblelocked arrangement of aubergine, sweet chewy dried tomato "petals", chickpeas, and balls of what appeared to be cumin spiced yam.

Sir enjoyed a glass of Dirk Niepoort's 2004 Vertente with his lamb, while the Thierry Richoux Irancy recommended to me was so damn tasty, we each ordered another glass in lieu of dessert.

What Mint provides is cooking as entertainment; McGrath is an immensely talented show-off. The Michelin star? He thoroughly deserves one – and probably some more.

Table Talk

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MINT

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DAMAGE: €234 (including service) for two starters, two mains, two aperitifs, six glasses of wine and water

ATMOSPHERE: Funky

VERDICT: ★★★★★