



Advancing the Stone

Dylan McGrath learned some difficult lessons after the failure of his Michelin-starred restaurant, and is now convinced he has the perfect recipe for success with his new venture, Rustic Stone

A couple of years ago, I interviewed a chef who was as well known for his mood swings as his cooking. It was a salutary lesson in why you should never meet your heroes – after an hour of awkward silences, heavy sighs and snide remarks, I felt a little like Michael Parkinson must have done after his encounter with Meg Ryan.

So it was with some trepidation that I set off to meet Dylan McGrath at his new Dublin restaurant, Rustic Stone.

Through the 2008 TV documentary *The Pressure Cooker* – which charted his quest to secure a Michelin star for his now defunct Ranelagh restaurant Mint – McGrath became the epitome of that particular type of loud, macho chef who seemed to be everywhere during the boom years.

A few years on, if he ever really was that person, he doesn't appear to be anymore. The night before our interview, McGrath was happily strolling round his dining room, greeting customers and stopping to chat with old clients from Mint who had come out to support his new venture.

It was a wet and wintry midweek night, yet Rustic Stone was almost full to capacity. The reason, McGrath believes, is because it has tapped into the psyche of the dining public. "I knew instinctively it would work, because it deals with the reality of where Ireland is right now," he tells me the next day.

"I was moving in a certain direction with Mint – everybody knows I wanted another star, and that's what I was working towards. But once that went, and I'd made the decision to stay in Ireland, I had to think about what I could do that could make money in this climate."

The result is a menu with everything from steaks that customers

cook to order on hot stones, to soups, pastas, salads and the best crab mayonnaise this side of west Cork. There's a heavy emphasis on healthy eating, with ingredients like rice bran oil and agave syrup used to keep fat and sugar levels down, while dishes such as cold beetroot broth infused with orange and dill pay homage to McGrath's Michelin pedigree.

"I wanted to do something that was fun and good value, but I also wanted to keep my creative side going, and I suppose you can see that with the likes of that dish," he says. "I may not be doing the Michelin thing any more, but I don't want to waste everything I've learned about flavour."

Born in Dublin, McGrath grew up in Belfast, getting his first job in Jury's Inn before a stint with Paul Rankin at Roscoff, then the only restaurant in the north with a Michelin star. From there he moved to Dublin, working in The Commons and Peacock Alley before heading for London, where he worked with John Burton Race at L'Ortolan before becoming head chef at Tom Aikens' eponymous Chelsea restaurant.

By 2006 he was back in Dublin and installed at the helm of Mint, which may have been located in well-heeled, high-spending Ranelagh, but which was also tiny by high-end restaurant standards. "It was the worst small room ever, it was a nightmare," says McGrath. "I hated the bloody place by the end, and as for the name, it sounded like a bad 1980s Indian. But at the time I was able to make it work because people were prepared to spend at that level."

But as spending levels plummeted, Mint's capacity of just 40 diners proved fatal. "It would have survived fine in a bigger space – there are still people cooking high-end food that are still in business – but at that size, it needed a thriving economy to sustain it," McGrath says.

When Mint folded in 2009, McGrath took a break from the kitchen for a while. "I was fortunate compared to a lot of people; I'd lived within my means, so I didn't have massive personal debts. I did a bit of private cooking for old Mint customers, a gig here and a gig there. I wasn't really sure about

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what I wanted to do, but I knew that I didn't want to do a weak version of Mint."

He was also wary of becoming a poster boy for the recession. "I did one interview and that was it. I think some people just wanted to hear the horror story – they wanted me to tell them that I'd sat in a darkened room for weeks on end."

Like many who have seen their businesses fail, McGrath considered leaving Ireland, and admits to being tempted by the offer of a job at the three Michelin-starred Alinea in Chicago. "I quite possibly would have left Ireland if it wasn't for the fact that my family is here," he says.

Now he has plans to expand the Rustic Stone concept. "I designed it with the aim of rolling it out in other locations," he says.

"The food offering is pretty unique, and the emphasis on nutrition is what could take it international. The challenge for me now is to learn how to do volume consistently, and not burst a blood vessel in the process."

A handful of profitable Rustic Stones would also allow McGrath to turn his attention back to high-end cooking. But while he describes the process of gaining Michelin stars as "a game that appeals to me", he is realistic about just when the economy might permit him to get back into that game.

"There will come a time when people are prepared to pay for food at that level again, but for now I'm grateful that I'm still here and I have a good business," he says.

"The biggest thing standing in the way of Rustic Stone becoming a success was me, because I only understood one type of food. I had cooked at Michelin level for so long that I didn't think anything beneath it was any good. Now I have a business that makes money and allows me to still be creative, even if it's in a different way."

He still believes that Ireland will one day have its own three-star Michelin restaurant. "I don't see why not, although obviously not in this climate," he says.

"A lot of things would have to fall into place; the business model and the location would have to be bang on, and you would have to really connect with your Irish customers and take them with you. If it does happen it could take ten years – not necessarily for someone to be cooking at that level, but for everything to fall into place to allow it to happen. There isn't enough business here to sustain it yet."

It's clear that when the opportunity arises to cook at Michelin level

again, McGrath will grab it; during his time away from the kitchen, he has filled several notebooks with new recipe ideas. But he's also philosophical about the path his life has taken over the past two years.

"Opening this place has made me understand the commercial nature of the business, the concept of broad appeal and how restaurants operate at different levels. If Mint had kept going, I would never have learned any of that. I'm only 32, so if I'm lucky enough to get the chance to go down that road again, I'll be older, wiser and smarter," he says.

"I'm also calmer; I don't get so stressed about things now, I can put things into perspective. Mind you, put me back in the ring and within two minutes I'll probably be shouting again."



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