



Red-hot chef has chilled out to sweeten his style

I'M so much more relaxed now," says Dylan McGrath. And the 33-year-old *enfant terrible* of Irish cooking looks it too.

As I sit opposite the near legendary chef in **Rustic Stone**, his South Great George's Street casual dining restaurant, I observe the changed man. No longer does he have the pasty complexion of one who spends all his time indoors; in his case, indoors meant the kitchen of his Michelin star restaurant, Mint, which closed in 2009 due to the economic downturn and its size — it seated only 40.

Now he sports a healthy glow. He explains that he's just back from a holiday in Marbella. Time was when he wouldn't have known how to take a break. Later on he tells me that he hadn't taken a holiday for nine years. Any wonder that he was wound as tight as a coil.

He wears a well-cut jacket and T-shirt, expensive looking, which show off his lean physique. You can check him out for yourself next month when he appears on RTE One in the Irish version of *Masterchef* with maitre d' Nick Mounier. Every morning he runs along the quays, near his Spencer Dock home which he shares with his brother. He goes to the gym too.

"I now have oxygen in my lungs," he says. There was a time when he probably inhaled nothing more than the clammy steam of his



kitchen. Daily exercise is part of the new Dylan, as is the home. Back in 2007, when I last met him, he was living across the road from Mint.

While he has his photo taken, his **Rustic Stone** colleagues slag him, declaring that he never smiles. They are right. He is like the *Mona Lisa's* sulky cousin. Scowling seems to be second nature to him. Then it appears. At first he fights it, but the smirk becomes a quick, benevolent smile, before he reverts to his straight face for the camera.

What? Has the man with the supposed hard heart developed a soft centre? People had told me that McGrath was a new man but I found it hard to believe. How could this temperamental leopard have changed his spots?

After all, this was the hot-headed chef who came to the nation's attention when he started working as the head chef and manager in the high-class Ranelagh restaurant which, within months of opening, went on to win a Michelin star for its magnificent meals. After he featured in a RTE fly-on-the-wall documentary, called *Pressure Cooker*, in which he roared and cursed at his chefs in Mint, his infamy spread like wildfire.

Call me warped, but I had a soft spot for him. Long before the TV show surfaced I had interviewed him for *Life* magazine. People thought he was too intense and far too focused but I thought he was wonderful. Extreme, yes, but hugely admirable for going all out and giving his all to the restaurant he was running.

Mint was his big break. Shouting like a sergeant major in the kitchen was his style. Not everyone liked it, but he didn't care. It worked for him and those who were able for

the pressure blossomed. McGrath, this new kid on the block, had been raised in West Belfast and later went to London to train with the best.

When he was an underling in London kitchens, his superiors roared and shouted at him. He took all the humiliating talk because as he said, "I had bigger fish to fry". He was learning and he respected their authority.

Finally with Mint he got a shot at his own restaurant — he was part proprietor too — so now that he was in charge, he would take full control and if that meant bellowing at his kitchen staff, so be it. People told him that he was going to burn out but he told me that wasn't going to happen.

"I'm not going to burn out, I'm on fire," he said then. Listening to him was thrilling. Anyone could tell that he was bursting with ambition and the embodiment of Oscar Wilde's line, 'Nothing succeeds like excess'.

"I look after the people who work with me but when things go wrong, I get upset and I shout," he said. "It can get fairly heated but my main intention is improving people. I'm very hard on my people but I'm very hard on myself as well. If something isn't perfect I genuinely get very f**king upset. People need to be strong to work with me but when somebody is pushing you, you learn."

Back in 2007, as he talked about his working day, and his life which was consumed by his work, it was clear that he was going all out. He told me that he woke at six every morning, absolutely exhausted. He didn't eat much as his stomach consisted of about 16 spoonfuls of soup or sauce, from all the tasting in the kitchen. He wasn't going to

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tell me how many cups of coffee he drank every day, as people worried that he drank too many.

No wonder he ended up with seven ulcers by the time Mint closed.

"You have to deny [yourself a] social life because you're locked away in a kitchen for a long, long time," he told me that day. "You have to be obsessed. I'm a control freak but only because if I don't do it, things will crash. You'd be an idiot to take your eye off the ball just because we've had a couple of great reviews."

He knew that he was giving his all.

"I never switch off. It's an affliction in some ways. All my life people have been telling me to switch off and get a balance but that's them. They'll remain in their mundane bullshit world about *Eastenders* sh*t and I'm quite happy that I don't. I don't think I ever will. What benefits from being diluted? I work the way I do because there's a chance of a bigger reward."

And he got his reward with his Michelin star and a steady stream of big-spending customers, but then Ireland went bust and the restaurant went down the tubes.

"Everybody wants to hear that you went into a dark room and you put your head in your hands," he says. "It was very tough but I don't want to make a big deal about it, as if poor me. It was something I had to deal with. Back then all I understood was the work and the food. I felt very annoyed that I'd taken this big risk and the place had gone bang."

It took a huge toll on him and part of that was because he had made so many sacrifices, including in his personal life. He is single now. (He had been in a relationship for three years with a nutritionist — they are still good friends.) He says that his brother will tell him about some family event and Dylan asks, where he was during that. "You were in Mint," he was told. That bubble consumed his life.

When I remind him of what he was like, he nods in

recognition and seems somewhat appalled.

"I can't deny the fact that I was very intense back then. I was very driven and I was running a race in my mind. That single-mindedness can nearly take over your character. But because you need it so much, it's all that gets you out of bed and it becomes a dominant part of who you are, but you can't live like that.

"It's difficult when you've applied so much lack of compromise to your life. I didn't know how to compromise. After the documentary, I was labelled everything from insecure to unbalanced. I was probably unbalanced, that's true. I was all one way and I didn't know how to develop. I needed to develop."

That process had started when Mint was up and running, with the great team that he had built. Dylan could afford to take some time off to live. After all the years of sacrifice, he promised himself that he would live it up.

"Chilling out was good for me — learning how to interact and learning how to stop being so intense. I had to learn how to talk to a woman. I couldn't even do that, you'd be surprised. My social skills were not good. I had such high standards, it was stupid. I had to change myself. Nobody was going to change me."

His mother Mary told him that he was going to have to change. Did he listen to her? Of course he didn't.

"I'd say, 'What would you know? I've got to go. I'm going into a tunnel.'" Now he realises that she was right. "She predicted a lot of things before she died. She said that things were going to turn around and that I had to adapt. She had a lot of faith in me."

Sadly, Mary died earlier this year. She had cancer. Dylan is understandably hesitant to talk about it, as his grief is still raw, but he says that her illness put a lot of things in perspective and has made him the man he is today.

When he opened **Rustic Stone**, he spent a lot of time in Belfast with his mother.

"I had missed too much already and I wasn't going to miss anymore. Family is very important to me," he says. He is the oldest of six.

"My mum made me promise that I would never curse on television again. I told her that in the kitchen in the documentary I was just doing my job. That I couldn't say, 'please can you pass me that plate?'"

I have a feeling that Dylan has kept his promise to his mother. "I'm so much more rounded as a person. I'm more patient and my character has developed a lot more."

He quotes Salvador Dali's line about the futility of striving for perfection. "**Rustic Stone** is about imperfection. It's rustic." And he is easier on himself. No longer is he clocking up the ulcers, he is learning how to drive, and he is making time for other people and himself.

"I still push myself. I'm working on a book and I'd like to open another restaurant, when Dublin is ready for it."

If he was back in the kitchen would he be a mellow soul? "I'd like to say that I would never behave that way again [referring to the documentary] but that's not f**king true. Put me back in a kitchen and give me five chefs and tell me to cook and I'll kill everyone. How else would I do it? If you put a racket back in McEnroe's hand, would he lose his temper? Of course."

Outside the kitchen he assures me that he's a gent, and that he always was one.

A few tables away his **Rustic Stone** staff is waiting for a meeting with him, but instead, he gives me a little more of his time. Then on parting, I get a hug. A hug? Before this, I would have been too scared to shake his hand. He seemed that menacing. Dylan McGrath has changed. He has grown up. Now he sees the big picture. It suits him.

'Masterchef' starts on RTE1 on Tuesday, Sept 6, 9.30pm

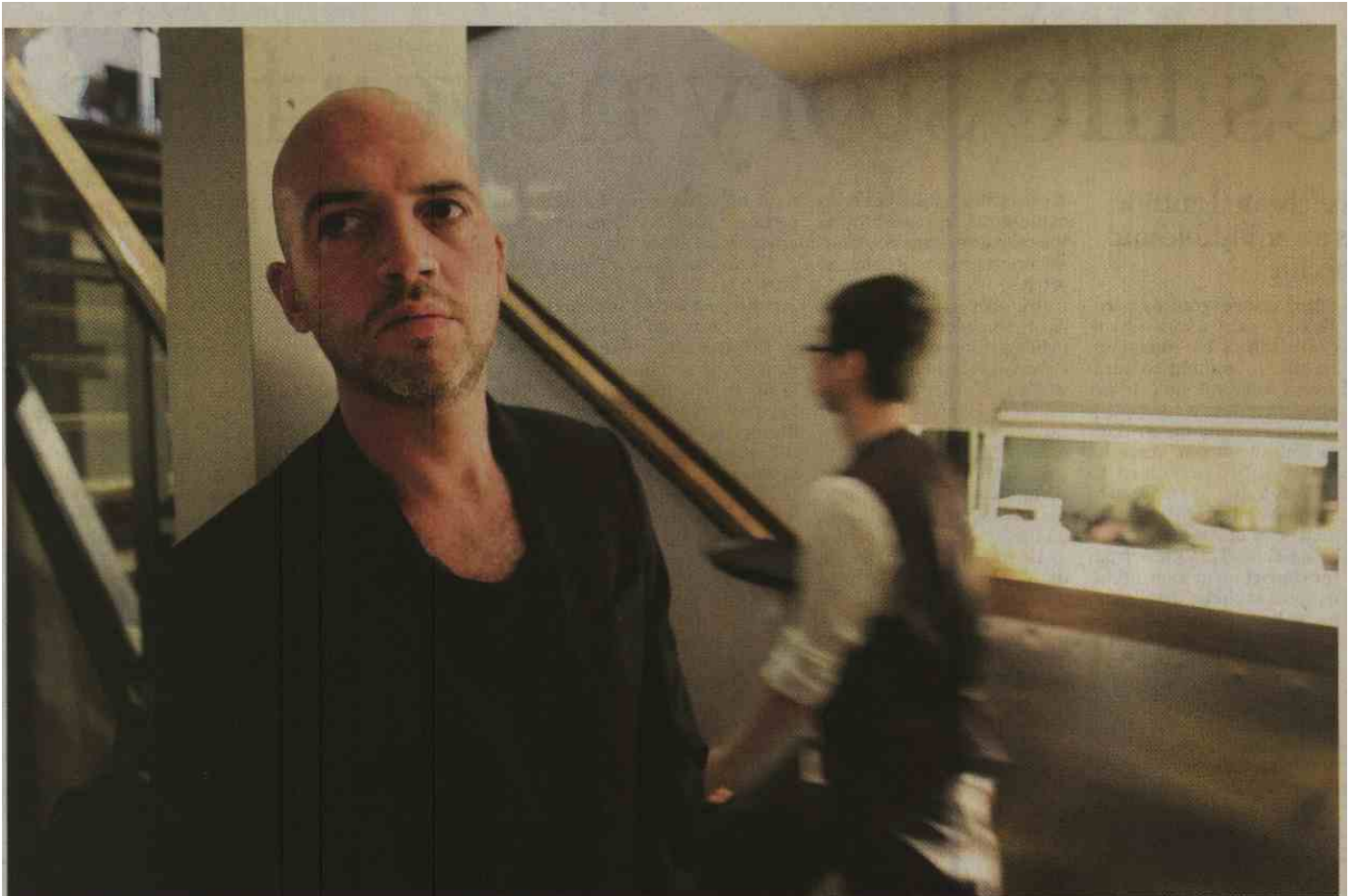
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GROWING PAINS: 'I'm so much more rounded as a person, more patient,' says **Dylan McGrath**. Mint's demise took a huge toll on him Photo: Gerry Mooney