



# OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

When Ireland went belly up, so did Dylan McGrath's Michelin-star restaurant. Mint was, he admits now, 'an indulgence'. Today, the enfant terrible of Irish cooking exclusively reveals his new project to **Barry Egan**, and it will come as a surprise to both his fans and his critics. Dylan always had balls. These days, he is chastened and mellow, and he now has stones. Very hot ones. Photography by **Agata Stoinska**

**M**int was a culinary Shangri-La despoiled by the global crash. Its closure was an experience proprietor Dylan McGrath would

not wish to repeat in a hurry.

Just before Easter 2009, his much-hyped restaurant, Mint, closed in ignominy. Suddenly, he was the most talked-about chef in Ireland, for all the wrong reasons. How could this have happened to Dylan, of all people? As he tells it, the big spenders disappeared overnight: one week, he was lifting over €7,000 on a Friday night, the next, it plummeted to under €2,500. The revenue vanished out of his considerably pokey – to say nothing of considerably pricey – upmarket restaurant in Ranelagh.

Almost two years later, Dylan, still only 32, is honest enough to admit that he saw the writing on the kitchen wall as far back as October 2008. When that Christmas wasn't what it should have been in terms of revenue, Dylan knew it was only a matter of time before Mint went into liquidation – as it did, three cruel months later.

"I didn't expect Ireland to go wallop," Dylan says now. "I didn't expect the banks to shut down and for investment to walk away overnight. That is where we were left. We were – pardon the pun – banking on those high rollers. It was 37 chairs. You don't need to be Einstein to realise that Mint needed to move to a bigger premises. To capitalise on what was done in that space, it was always the intention to move. But where are you going to move to when the banks are shut? The spend changed overnight."

It was still a shock to many. Dylan McGrath was the big-swinging-mickey chef

Sunday, 8 August 2010

Page: 16

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with a RTE documentary made about him — *The Pressure Cooker*, in February 2008 — and, more importantly, a Michelin star, which he was awarded in January 2008.

Back when Mint was busy, he says, the star drew people in. “The customers came to eat my food for a special occasion. Once the recession kicked in, the star put people off. Nowhere else in the world was like that — just in Ireland. It was like a bad word having a star,” he grimaces. “And, inevitably, customer spend went. We all realised that Ireland wasn’t as wealthy as we thought it was. The customers were really conscientious suddenly. They weren’t giving in to the emotion of being elaborate with their cash in restaurants. They just weren’t spending.”

How did you feel in the kitchen — looking out the hatch and seeing less and less people were coming into Mint each night? Did you feel that the noose was slowly tightening around your neck?

“I was very frustrated. I was very frustrated at the fact that I knew what position Mint was in. We had fought so hard to keep it consistent and to keep creative, but the world was changing. Ireland was changing.”

He shakes his head when I ask him if he was depressed. “I was incredibly frustrated and annoyed. Depressed?” he raises an eyebrow. “I mean, there were times.”

It was very tough the first couple of months, he says. “In fact, it was scary. Everyone I talked to was in trouble. There

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was nervousness and uncertainty out there.”

“Let’s get some perspective here,” he adds. “There are people in Ireland who have had bigger problems than me. Much bigger. But I’m alive. I have watched what has gone on in the country. It has been a real eye-opener to see people’s lives destroyed over what has happened in this country. For me, I have had to stand back. People have had real problems in their lives. There was a real sadness for me that my work was removed, but I am still here,” he says with a gentle sensitivity, which is somewhat at odds with his public image.

I want to rescue Dylan from caricature and cliché. I know him from around the town, and I think I know him better than most. So excitable depictions of Dylan McGrath as a foul-mouthed, shouty Mr Angry are generally

to be avoided. This image of him comes from the *Pressure Cooker* programme on RTE when the star chef threw some guy out in 2007 — “For being a prick,” he says. “I have fucked a number of people out. Some guy was rude to the staff. I could tell he was just being a prick.” In reality, Dylan is more sensitive and boyish than oikish. His anger, when it comes out, is reserved more for the Government. “To see how this independent state has let its people go through so much suffering, and it will continue, makes me angry,” he says. “And I was disappointed in Ireland, to be honest.”

He says that his mother, Mary, was very supportive and told him to stick with it. “You’re going to have to adapt,” she told her son. Wisely, he followed her advice.

His new, soon-to-open restaurant represents a seismic shift in his career. This won’t be fancy-dan, show-off cuisine. This is back-to-basics with a health twist, *a la* Dylan McGrath. It is prescient because of the state we’re in as a nation.

Fianna Fail and their banker friends have left Ireland in an absolute dog’s dinner. So don’t expect bling grub from the occasionally combustible super-chef any more. Dylan knows as much about the effects of the economic downturn as anyone. He bears the scars of a very public meltdown of his own. He went from Mint to skint. But he didn’t run away. He was offered a plum job in Chicago. “It was one of the best restaurants in America,” he says. He moved in with his younger brother, Colin, in Dublin’s Spencer Dock instead.

“I lived within my means,” he says. “I could have gone to London or America,” he says, “but it just doesn’t suit my soul. I don’t feel like I belong in America. My family is here. My mum’s here and she is sick. Being there for her — and having that family unit — is so important to me.”

He cooks for his mother every time he goes home to Belfast: everything from roast dinners to fish to salads. “We are a very tight unit as a family. I lived with one of my brothers for the past two and a half years in the Docklands in Dublin, and I used to cook for him every night. As a family, we are like glue. We laugh all day long. We have the best of crack. Whatever perception people have of me as being moody or whatever, that’s my work — but who I am privately is very different. I am very, very close to my family. I love being in Ireland. As frustrating as it is — it actually conflicts with what I do — but it is my country and I love it. I love my family.”

He namechecks them all: Billy, Francis, Patrick, May, Elaine, and mother Mary. Elaine and Francis are still in Belfast, as is their beloved Ma. Dylan won’t discuss his father. Dylan says he “doesn’t see him and doesn’t know him” and leaves it at that. I know when to leave a subject alone with Dylan. “I do like to keep some stuff private

about my life. I am aware of what you are saying, that your past and your environment makes you who you are and what way you turn out.”

Ever since Mint closed its doors in early 2009, Dylan has been licking his wounds and biding his time, waiting for the right moment to return to the kitchen of his own restaurant after a deal with Louis Murray’s La Stampa on Dawson Street fell through earlier this year. That time is now.

It is 10am and Dylan, bloodied but unbowed, is sitting in the basement of his premises on George’s Street. There isn’t even a sign up over the door yet. When the sign does go up, it will say “Rustic Stone by Dylan McGrath”. The restaurant is a few weeks off opening its doors and there is a frenzy of activity around Dylan as dishes are tried and tables are moved here and there. He talks at about 200 miles an hour about the project and about the pain of the past. Wearing a cap and jeans, he looks like one of Dexys Midnight Runners. He also looks scarily relaxed. He has clearly put considerable thought into all this. For starters, the new restaurant will accommodate 120 covers at once: 52 tables. Mint had 14 cramped tables.

More than anything, Dylan looks like he is ready for the challenge that awaits him. He knows it won’t be easy. He knows the recession has not gone away. He also knows that some people expect — hope, even — that he will fail. Dylan has perfected his methodology, always correcting, always learning. He is ready for whatever the economy and the critics who dined out on Mint’s dire demise can throw at him.

He orders a coffee, practically knocks it back in one, and starts talking. “First and foremost,” Dylan begins, “there is no secret of how Ireland has changed dramatically in terms of what has happened to the dining scene, what’s happened to customer spend. As a business, I have been offered every opportunity to adapt — and to go back, even, to do another version of Mint. But with customer spend dropped the way it has, and with the small market, for the sums to add up in this country in terms of rent and in terms of staff it would have become a diluted version of Mint. I didn’t want to do that with my new restaurant.

“What I was cooking at Mint was very high-end and complex, labour-intensive, artistic. Yet, Mint could never really have been successful long term because it had so few tables. Mint was always a stepping stone. I said that to you years ago, and I will say it again now. Inevitably, what we were cooking was high-end in terms of product and, as a consequence, price. You ate there. High produce: turbot, truffles, langoustines, foie gras. Twenty-eight euros a kilo for turbot, I think — I’ve been out for a year. The point is, when you’re dealing with high-end

Sunday, 8 August 2010

Page: 16

Circulation: 270,362

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products, you are charging a certain price for them — you can't put on these cuts without charging the right mark-up on them. So Mint was an investment, a stepping stone. It was always supposed to be that. There were other restaurants that were doing it, the difference was they had volume for turnover. In terms of creative cooking, that's what Mint was: a gastronomic restaurant. And that costs money. I wanted to do a restaurant with my style."

What is the philosophy behind this new restaurant? "I want to do a contemporary restaurant that is innovative but is not just copying the whole fish-pie thing, or mushy peas and fucking deep-fried fish and chips. Like, the rental of a plate for €18 for something that you could have had in a bag! It's a fucking joke! So, what can we do that is innovative and tastes amazing? It is a huge challenge. I just thought I wanted to do a restaurant that I'd like to eat in. You have to have a philosophy. That is important.

"The philosophy," he adds, like the Baudelaire of the kitchen, "is to try and do a contemporary restaurant that is accessible to everyone in terms of price point and completely removes the formality of what that other restaurant was," he says, referring to Mint, "and this is an approach to new casual dining. So, when you come in and you have a cup and a plate and a style — there is a formality to that. To pull the tablecloth off the table and introduce a new, rustic style that is an approach about flavour and simplicity without any complications. The hot-stone philosophy is a cooking method that comes from Spain and Madrid. I have taken it to a new level where I'm having these particular stones made out of lava rock and cut into certain diameters."

He brings me on an extended tour of the restaurant. He shows me a selection of stones — very nice, but they just look like stones to me. We return to our seats whereupon he continues his rhapsody with new gusto. "The meat and fish will be the best and the freshest. It is proper 20-inch dry-aged beef: everything from the rib, to the sirloin, to the fillet, to the rump. I am going to give people all the choices. You can come in and have a steak for €21, or you pay cheaper. It is just really good meat, and when you are cooking like that yourself, without oil, the nutrition of that, the freshness, the flavour is just to die for."

The concept behind Rustic Stone involves a hot stone on each table with which the customer can cook their selected cut of meat. But is it the case, I ask Dylan, that I'll be paying you while I cook my own steak at the table and you're out the back smoking a cigar?

"I'll be full throttle in the kitchen," he laughs. "There is a lot more just going on than just the stones and the steaks. I just want to do really fresh produce. You'll have this most amazing wooden bowl where you'll get the

best salads in Ireland. The waiter will dress it at the table, so it is as fresh as it gets."

He is cagey about his cuisine. He won't say how he'll cook his chips, what he'll put in his burgers and the like, for fear his recipes will get ripped off. Cagier still, Dylan says all the people who were owed money when Mint went into liquidation have been sorted out. Yet, he won't go into detail. There weren't huge personal debts across the board in Mint. His creditors have all been very cool, he says. He has backers with Rustic Stone but they want to remain private, he says. Generally, he doesn't want to talk about money — whether it is how much he lost on Mint or how much he has invested himself in hot stones. "I don't want to bare my soul that much," he rings me the following day to say. "I want to keep some of myself back."

Other parts of him cannot, however, be held back. The broody genius who once upon a time was serving high-art truffles and turbot and langoustines to Ireland's foodie cognoscenti has big ambitions. Once Rustic Stone is a success, he plans to open something else down the line closer to Mint: "If Ireland ever lets me go back to that creative, high-end style of cooking," he smiles.

Ireland can certainly do with Dylan's passion right now, albeit just in the kitchen. "It is all-important to me that I make sure that what I'm serving is very good." That passion, he hopes, spills over on to those around him. "I want to get the best out of the people around me. I am very abrupt and I have a very no-nonsense approach, but there is honesty in that. There is no room for short cuts or bullshitters who are going to fuck it up on me. I am very ambitious."

Born in Dublin's Rotunda Hospital, Dylan was, however, raised on the Falls Road where the IRA, he says, controlled everything. "Living in that environment, Belfast made me determined to get ahead and have choice in life," he says. He was 17 when he finally got away from West Belfast. He went to Portrush Catering College. He was kicked out after a couple of weeks for "mischief": Typical Dylan, he doesn't elaborate.

"I wanted to live away from home so I could get up to mischief. Look, I went away and I wanted to be a chef, but just very flippantly, you know," he says, shrugging his shoulders like Johnny Rotten in his pomp. "And then I ended up being very good at it. I remember I used to go the long route about things, and I can take on an awful lot of work that other people couldn't do. I was only 18 and I remember being a head chef. I just had a drive. It was like that thing of 'the will is stronger than the skill'. I think I had that."

Dylan's first memory of food was as young child enjoying "the flavour of lamb fat". He can vividly recall picking the crust off the roast on Sunday when granny wasn't looking. The smell "still reminds me of her instantly".

Name some of the biggest wankers you've come across in this business.

"Too many to mention."

Name a chef you respect, then.

"Grant Achatz from Alenia," he says without hesitation. "I met him last year in Chicago. He was diagnosed two years ago with tongue cancer. So, you can imagine, an absolute nightmare for a chef at that level — and he was later awarded best chef in America. To have the pure dedication to triumph over such an obstacle is a lesson in resilience . . . that's so commendable."

Equally commendable, perhaps, is Dylan's

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promise with Rustic Stone to "offer value for money at a time when Ireland wants it, needs it".

That's rich coming from Mr High-End Restaurant, I joke, referring to the €190 bill for a meal for two in Mint. Yes, I ate there once. I think *Sunday Independent* editor Aengus Fanning still has my expenses claim framed somewhere in his office.

"I ran a high-end restaurant, but I am not a high-end person," he says. "I learned before I opened here that I needed to address the fact that I had to be more accessible to more people. I want to do this restaurant that will be accessible to everyone. I want to do something that is original, that is unique. It is not a fucking French brasserie. It is not Italian. It is not Spanish. I am not going to do a fucking Irish restaurant. I want this to be a restaurant that everyone can go to with a particular price point with the food cooked well. If I only understand one thing as a creative person, then I'm fucked. I want to understand more than that."

I ask him how he remains creative as a chef while making a restaurant that is accessible. "By removing the complexity. By removing the high-wire stuff. You rely on the technique in terms of flavour," he says, adding that, "I am at the opposite end of the market. It is forcing me to be creative."

During his time away from professional cooking, Dylan also learned an awful lot about nutrition from his girlfriend, Erika Doolan. "She is amazing. She has taught me a lot. I have learned from her that people are now more concerned about what

Sunday, 8 August 2010

Page: 16

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they eat. And it is important to have an informative menu that suggests a low GI, that suggests unsaturated fats, that suggests cooking without heavy oil. Bearnaise sauce made with olive oil instead of butter. It is about giving people the option to eat healthily and cleanly," he says, adding that Erika is doing all the nutrition direction for the menu. "She is very body conscious and is always at me over using this and using that. I have learnt loads from her about fats and eggs and GI."

What have you learned from her as a woman? "She calms me down. She is supportive and incredibly funny and great company and an incredibly loyal and cool person. We are living together."

I met them in The Shelbourne a few months ago. They're a lovely couple.

Dylan says Erika often tells him he's like the mad genius Jean-Baptiste Grenouille in *Perfume: The Story Of A Murderer* — who obsessively creates hundreds of new perfumes in a murderous attempt to distill the scent of a human being. "I enjoy being creative about food," Dylan laughs. "I don't know where that comes from. I just have a real passion for it."

He takes another — unnecessary — glug of caffeine. "We want to make Rustic Stone as interesting as possible for the customer. Ireland has changed. Mint was an indulgence in itself of a restaurant. Everybody has a different style. I was the young guy with the energy who came along with a new approach and I built up a lot of credibility within the trade. I wanted to take that further and further but we got cut off at the neck. Now I am back on track," he smiles from beneath his cap.

You talked a lot about the importance of family earlier. Would you like to be a dad some day? "Sure. I'm sure I will someday, although I've still got to keep my mornings free for chopping onions for a while yet."

Dylan McGrath wants his reputation back. He wants to be Top Of The Pots again, wants to be Ireland's most exciting chef once more. And he is willing to walk on hot stones to achieve it. ■

Photography by Agata Stoinska  
Assisted by Vinnie Gregan



