



With a new restaurant opening on the cards, Dylan McGrath is feeling "relaxed and quietly optimistic" about the week ahead.

IN A CITY of bistros and brasseries, all doing similar things, it's a relief when someone says they are going to try something different. Creativity tends to stifle in a recession. So we're a tad excited about Dylan McGrath's burgeoning new concept restaurant on George's Street.

The chef is promising a departure from the, now thoroughly done, French brasserie schtick that has so dominated Dublin cuisine for the past ten years. He is also trying to do something different with cooking: by not doing it, sort of. McGrath's "hot stone" concept, is, in his words, "about getting the diner more engaged with food in a real way."

The Belfast chef, who has been in the wilderness for a year and a half, is hoping to add a little DIY magic to mealtimes at

his new George's Street joint.

"I'm not work shy or anything, and it's not just about getting the customer to do the work," he laughs. "It's very much about consistency, and I'm all about consistency these days."

So how does it all work? "Say the customer orders a steak," he says, "it will cook on a hot stone on their table. It simply means that each bite is just as hot as the previous one."

So what's the overall ethos? "I want to be innovative *and* popular, I want to do big numbers and I want to prove to myself, as much as anyone else, that it can be done, even in a recession."

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think diners are too. It's just not doing anything for Irish cooking. And I am passionate about Irish cooking and Irish food. I want to see it evolve."

The brilliant chef is back in the game after considering his options during his extended sabbatical from the kitchen. During that time, a number of different rumours flitted about town regarding what Irish cooking's great hope would do next, from going to America, to setting up shop in Dawson Street's Balzac, any

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number of theories were offered.

"I needed to take some time out. And although I considered it, I realised I didn't just want to be another chef who just goes to London or the US.

"That's why I'm staying put in Dublin. Emmigrating would be the easy way out. I want to stay here. I want to be challenged, and Irish people are challenging!" he says with a grin.

"Dublin, surprisingly, is a hard nut to crack, here you need to make people feel comfortable, you need to surprise with your cooking, and these days, you've definitely got to give them value for money too."

McGrath is still as passionate as ever, but in person these days, there isn't that underlying fieriness that so influenced

people's perception of him in his Michelin days.

"I am a much more relaxed individual these days, not that I was ever the monster I was portrayed as in *The Pressure Cooker*. But that impression of me has just stuck, and it's not really me."

The passion for gastronomic perfection, however, is undimmed. "I am so excited to be back in the kitchen, it's really exciting. I proved that I can do high-end Michelin-style food, and

as much as I love that kind of cooking, it's just not in line with what Dubliners want these days. That said, I will be as creative and as engaged in what I am serving as I ever have.

"I've become more interested in the healthy aspects of eating, I've started getting into Japanese

flavours, that's the direction I'm going in

"I'm not turning into a health nut, but I have a better awareness now of how different foods react with our bodies, so I've lightened everything. No more heavy butter sauces, no more *jus*. I'm doing chutneys and relishes. It's healthier, but it also gives me a chance to do things I haven't done before. I even tried something with quinoa last week!", he exclaims, as if he has just admitted to drinking a glass of Liffey water.

McGrath is excited again and we should be too, the man who was undoubtedly the most interesting thing to happen to Irish dining in the past ten years is back behind the stove, sort of, and surprisingly calm. Read our full review of Rustic Stone next week. (EH)