

Restaurant Reviewer: Mint



MINT, Main St Ranelagh

By Aingeala Flannery
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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: the more fat-bottomed Ranelagh barristers you can accommodate of an evening, the better. We happened to be going on to a gig, so the clockwatchers needn't have worried.

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 -- it took enormous self restraint not to spoil my appetite with black olive curlicues and sesame buns.

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, 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, flavoursome 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.

Finally, there was a smattering of Lilliputian sized shallot rings -- onions battered a la carte. I wondered if McGrath was having a laugh at the expense of his well-heeled clientele.

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, I didn't complain when my halibut main course fell short of greatness. I gobbled it up in a bid to enjoy what little heat was left in it. Nor could I take time to savour the accoutrements: celeriac ravioli and puree, choucroute and morteau sausage. If the timing went awry with my main, it was spot on with the Gentleman's loin of lamb, served in juicy [pink](#) slices, with 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 entertain-ment; McGrath is an immensely talented show-off. It hardly matters he has the peculiar distinction of being the first and last person I would invite to a dinner party. The Michelin star? He thoroughly deserves one -- and probably some more.

The low down

TYPICAL DISH: Turbot

RECOMMENDED: Tasting menu

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

ON THE STEREO: Funk

AT THE TABLE: Barristers

WHAT TO WEAR: LK Bennett

DO SAY: Three bags full, Chef

DON'T SAY: I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more

- *Aingeala Flannery*