

The finest meal of my life

By Paolo Tullio

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Indulge me a little this week while I trawl through memory lane, in particular memories of Mint Restaurant in Ranelagh. Some years ago it had the improbable name of Zuccini, then with the arrival of chef Oliver Dunne its name changed to Mint. When I reviewed it I was enthusiastic almost to the point of over-enthusiasm, because the food was simply excellent. Oliver has since moved on to Bon Appétit in Malahide, where he has garnered a Michelin star.

When he left Mint I remember thinking that the owners would have a problem; Oliver was going to be a hard act to follow. A young chef called Dylan McGrath took over Mint and two years ago I went to see how things were going. Once again I found myself being wildly enthusiastic about the food. I summed it up like this: "the food that came to our table was nothing less than brilliant. Amazing tastes, extraordinary presentation, and a skill in preparation that's as rare as hen's teeth. This was food at the very zenith of cooking."

Not altogether surprisingly, a talent like that tends to get noticed. Dylan is now one of those chefs who has become a household name. A well-deserved Michelin star and plenty of exposure on TV has brought him to the attention of a lot of people. Not all the publicity he got was favourable. There were accusations that his management techniques were rough and his interpersonal skills were far from diplomatic, but there was never a word raised against his cooking skills. So with Dylan now firmly in the culinary constellation, I thought it was time to go once more to see how his accolades had shaped his cooking. We were five for dinner, Gerard Carthy, his wife Deirdre, friends Ken and Emma Casey, and me.

We were made instantly comfortable by an immensely poised staff of supreme professionalism, headed by Pierre Paillot, the restaurant manager and sommelier -- who frankly looks too young to drink, let alone administer a wine list of staggering dimensions. It arrived at the table as a hardback book, elegantly bound and containing some 50 pages listing over 400 wines. Quite how Pierre manages to store this quantity of wines in so small a space is a mystery.

Apart from presenting beautifully, the wine list is full of oenological jewels, ranging across the entire world of wine. With Pierre's help we settled on a white from Italy's extreme north-east, the Friuli region, called Borgo del Tiglio -- a 2005 from Collio, which was listed at €66. Apart from this single bottle of wine between us, we managed six big bottles of mineral water, priced at €5. If you had €100 or so to spend, there are some magnificent wines to choose from, including various years of Corton [Charlemagne](#) and the excellent Grange des Pères.

Before the menus arrived we were served small canapés, each one a delight and each one a tantalising glimpse of what wonders were still to come. There is a tasting menu priced at €125, which is seven courses, but we all chose from the à la carte menu.

Before our starters arrived the amuses bouches came; like the canapés, each one a miniature marvel. A great selection of breads were offered, all made in the kitchen, and happily no one tried to take it away with the starters. In fact more was offered with the main courses, just like they do in other countries.

So the starters arrived, two portions of langoustines, which came with apple purée, air-dried duck, glazed belly of pork, Jabugo ham and warm apple jelly flavoured with purple nasturtiums; one poached salmon in seasoned beetroot juice with a lemon and avocado mousse, one scallops, which were roasted and served with caramelised chicory, blood oranges and peeled black grapes, and lastly an asparagus plate, which came with Jabugo ham, quails' eggs and a hazelnut mayonnaise.

Every one of these was faultless, every element on every plate was perfect. Some elements were spectacular -- the poached quails' eggs crumbed and deep-fried, yet still with a runny centre; a few stems of wild asparagus that accompanied the fatter kind, the seasoned beetroot juice on the salmon -- all quite remarkable.

The mains were equally faultless, two portions of sea bass -- wild, from the Mediterranean -- one halibut, one lamb and one pork. The sea bass was served with a hot fennel mayonnaise, a chilled fennel soup on the side, black olives and sardines on sour dough toast and a crispy risotto.

The halibut came with an apricot and lemongrass soup, almond milk, crab meat, apricots and peas. The saddle of lamb came with seasonal courgette flowers, pickled peppers, parmesan and smoked paprika. Lastly the pork was hay-smoked and came with pork belly, sweet corn, polenta, and pearl barley.

The choice of flavours and their pairings were truly inspired. What McGrath has is a supremely *subtle* palate, which is coupled with a desire to invent, combine, explore and ultimately thrill. Even at this stage of the meal I was aware that I was experiencing something unusual, something rare and very special -- a meal without faults.

We chose three desserts to share among us, a chocolate sponge with a cherry mousse, a chocolate sorbet and yoghurt ice-cream; his signature passion fruit plate and the coconut crème brûlée, which came with roasted pineapple and a pineapple sorbet.

Before these arrived a pre-dessert came -- a shot glass with what seemed like a plastic divider, separating it into two halves. Swiftly these were removed and we were encouraged to drink it quickly. Suddenly my brain was sent into a synaptic spin, one side of my mouth had hot apple juice, the other side cold juice.

Every neuron was screaming "this is impossible", but it was real.

After the desserts came the coffees and petits fours. You know what? If you're going to have coffees and petits fours you might consider skipping desserts. The petits fours are not only spectacular to look at, but almost a dessert in themselves.

So finished what I believe was the finest meal of my life.

Immaculate service, spectacular food and supreme skills.

McGrath is both egregious and extraordinary and Mint is a restaurant for people who want to experience the heights of gastronomy. We settled a bill for €656.44.

- Paolo Tullio