



Making a MINT

MARILYN BRIGHT met *Gold Medal* chef DYLAN McGRATH, the man creating a stir in Mint Restaurant, winner of the *Hotel & Catering Review Gold Medal Award for Fine Dining Restaurants*, sponsored by Remy Martin.

Dylan McGrath approaches food with the unswerving concentration of an SAS man checking out visitors from a middle eastern embassy. You have the feeling that no bruised leaf of cress or over-browned crouton escapes his gimlet eye in the smooth running kitchen where the only sounds to be heard are the chopping of vegetables and occasional whirrings of various bits of kitchen kit.

The recipient of the *Hotel & Catering Review Gold Medal Award for Fine Dining Restaurants*, sponsored by Remy Martin, Dylan admits to a life dedicated to achieving perfection in his cooking. Just 30 years old, his CV is nothing less than a battle hardened vetran's listing of action on the front lines of Michelin star restaurants and working with some of the industry's most renowned - and notorious - chefs.

Moving from Carlow to the Falls Road in Belfast at the age of six, Dylan completed a secondary education with the Christian Brothers, but left without a career plan. He opted for Portrush College and a catering course, where his practical skill and flair proved to outstrip his academic application. Before this, he says, he had no real background in food, 'On the streets of West Belfast there were more important issues than cuisine.'

Taking up his first job in Jurys Inn, Belfast, Dylan's cooking ability and leadership skills were quickly recognised and he was made responsible for a brigade of 10 chefs. This came as a surprise, but it was the spur which led him to recognise his own ability and determine to climb the ladder of his profession.

In pursuit of his goals, Dylan went to work at Roscoff in 1998. At the time it was Northern Ireland's only Michelin starred restaurant and it was the fledgling chef's first introduction to the culinary world and to the work ethic demanded at this level. A year later, Dylan moved south to work in Dublin's hot

spot restaurant, Peacock Alley, under the brilliant and quixotic Conrad Gallagher.

The young chef could see that Irish eating habits were changing rapidly. He says he learned a lot from the experience with Gallagher, but eventually felt that the bigger stage for happening cuisine was in the UK and that was where he should widen his horizons. He began work at the two Michelin star L'Ortolan in Reading under John Burton-Race, the controversial chef famously highlighted for his non-prisoners approach to trainee chefs.

Dylan abandoned himself to work under this regime, foregoing any sort of social life and living above the restaurant. He credits the time spent at L'Ortolan with teaching him the importance of continually tasting food during the cooking process and he developed his passion for intense flavouring and well structured dishes. Burton-Race's repertoire was enormous, and the young chef says he began to understand how the components of a successful dish were married together, along with the importance of working within a firm and disciplined atmosphere.

By 2002, an exhausted Dylan returned to work in Dublin with his old friend Aidan Byrne at the Michelin starred Commons Restaurant. The break from high pressured lifestyle was welcome, but it wasn't long before the bright lights beckoned and he returned to the UK to work with Tom Aiken in his new restaurant in Chelsea. It was incredibly hard, Dylan remembers, and he was pushed to the limits. He acquired new skills in pastry and breadmaking and his ability and drive were recognised when he was made head chef by Aiken, reputed to be the toughest taskmaster in London.

With Aiken's unremitting commitment to freshness and seasonality, the head chef's duties extended to hitting the market at 4am every Tuesday morning, after a shift that would have ended just

three hours before. 'But I learnt the seasons for everything and the quality to look for hands on. I can tell you where the best artichokes come from and when celeriac and chestnuts are at peak condition - and best price. You have to know where to look and when, and your menu follows the produce in season. Once you've worked with the best you can't accept anything less.'

Eighteen months ago, Dylan returned to take over the helm of Mint Restaurant in Ranelagh, bringing with him an absolute insistence on perfection and consistency. Working in a tight 45 cover premises that formerly housed a neighbourhood fishmongers and greengrocery, a disciplined work atmosphere is vital to produce the stunningly innovative food that has rocketed the restaurant to universal acclaim.

Mornings in the compact kitchen are silent as prep gets underway, and no blaring radio is allowed. 'My team has to be thinking and concentrating on what they are doing. With a brigade of four or five we're trying to deliver what should take 30 chefs. No scatty heads are allowed here - there are places for chefs like that, but not in my kitchen.'

Dylan does express a slight regret for the confines of the business he's running now. 'If we had a bigger kitchen, I could be more patient with those who need support - there's just no room to carry anyone. I have learned to be more patient, though I'm a bit disappointed with the lack of ambition of many of the young Irish chefs - if you don't want to learn and get to the top, it's not worth the sacrifice of all the hard work and long days with little sleep.'

Having said that, Dylan admits that coming back to Ireland has had the good effect of slowing him down a bit, with more time to socialise and 'catch up with what I missed before. It's good to have fun too, and I'm more balanced now - you could say just more comfortable in my own skin.'