

Paolo Tullio



EATING OUT
Mint, Ranelagh,
Dublin 6

A couple of years ago a young chef recently returned from cutting his teeth in London, burst onto Dublin's restaurant scene. His name was Oliver Dunne and his showcase was Mint restaurant in Ranelagh. It didn't take the foodies long to find it; Mint was offering exceptional food at the price of an ordinary restaurant so it wasn't long before Oliver got plaudits from just about everyone.

There's a rule that gourmets and gourmands follow and it's this: you don't give your loyalty to a restaurant, you give it to the chef. As long as a great chef is in the kitchen, foodies will frequent the restaurant; once he goes somewhere else, they'll follow. This presents a bit of a problem to the restaurant owner. Like an impresario who's just lost a great act, they'll need a great act to follow - and that's no easy task.

This was the problem that Mint had when Oliver left to start his own restaurant - word has it he'll be opening up in Malahide in the Bon Appetit premises. Mint could have followed any one of a dozen strategies on his departure, but the final decision seems to have been to get the best possible replacement and keep the standards high.

So this week I went to see how the new crew were settling in. I arranged to have lunch there with Gerard Carthy, my colleague in tasteofireland.com, who is something of a foodie himself. There have been a few cosmetic changes to the interior; the kitchen is no longer on view, a bar now stands in front of what was the open service hatch. Some plate



A fresh mint taste

glass now defines the entrance walkway, but other than that the interior is much the same. Large tables surrounded by comfortable chairs are set with good napery, pretty cutlery and fine crockery.

There's a choice of three menus: a tasting menu which can only be ordered by the whole table, which comprises eight courses and costs €95, so that's for the adventurous and hungry. There's a set price lunch menu at €31.50, which offers three courses with a choice of two dishes for each course, followed by tea or coffee and petits fours. Very good value

I thought. The third menu is rather confusingly called an 'à la carte'.

I say confusingly because traditionally a set menu or a table d'hôte is one that offers a set meal for a set price, whereas an à la carte

prices each dish and you can choose what you feel like. Only after I'd ordered from the à la carte did I discover that it was actually a table d'hôte, with three courses priced at €65. I intended to eat two courses - the two I'd ordered - but if you do as I did you'll still pay for three courses. This effectively means that you can't really get value for money unless you're hungry enough to eat a full meal. I suspect that there are many ladies who lunch who might like to be able to have a smaller meal without paying for three courses.

While I ordered from the supposed à la carte, Gerard ordered from the set lunch. The starters were a selection of seasonal vegetables with summer shoots and flowers, or a hot asparagus mousse with a cream of morel sauce. Main courses offered either roast halibut with fennel gazpacho and a salad, or braised pork with celeriac lasagna and a carrot purée.

For dessert there was a choice of coconut ice cream with mango foam and a mango sorbet, or cheese. From the à la carte I ordered a borlotti bean soup with jabugo ham, artichokes and truffles, and for mains I chose the braised pork.

The wine list is well-chosen, long enough to be interesting,

and eye-wateringly expensive. There is one wine listed at less than €30, the rest run up to the hundreds. In fairness there are fine wines here; two premier cru Chablis from Ravenau, a fine selection of grands crus from Bordeaux and top-end wines from Italy, Australia and South Africa, but the mark-up is what you'd find on French wine lists, a multiplier of around three times over wholesale.

Gerard hardly drinks and I don't much at lunchtime, so I had a glass of a Syrah from the Côtes du Rhône at €11 to go with my pork. It was a good wine, rich and fairly complex, but overpriced at €11 a glass.

Now that you've read my complaints, it's time for the praise. Before we began the meal, an extraordinary array of breads were presented, all different, all expertly made, and all delicious. I was delighted to find that in Mint they don't try to take your bread away after your starters; in fact they even offer you more, just like the rest of Europe.

As for our meal, 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. The presentation of the dishes is worth describing too because it's a completely new style, something I've encountered nowhere else. The plates are busy with colour and at first sight almost without pattern, but as a whole it works and better still, it's not just pretty, the mix of textures and flavours is superbly executed.

The meal ended with Gerard's coconut ice cream, which I reached across and tasted. The mango foam that accompanied it was one of the most exquisite things I've ever tasted in my life, quite sensational. And the tour-de-force of culinary art didn't end there: the prosaically named 'petits fours' turned out to be the finest I've ever seen on a table, an extraordinary mix of tastes, design and innovation.

If you want to know how good modern cuisine can be, go to Mint and taste Dylan McGrath's cooking. Our bill came to €117.50 without service charge. **W**

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Food 5
Ambience 4
Service 5
Wine list 4
Value for money 3

Total 21/25

