

Living

Close Encounters
Dylan McGrath

‘All of a sudden we’re wondering where the customers have gone’

After two restaurant closures in the past year, the celebrity chef talks to *Tom Doorley* about his career, family, health challenges and why unfussy food is what Dublin diners really want

When I meet Dylan McGrath for lunch in Dax, the restaurant on Pembroke Street, there’s considerably less of him than I remember. If he stood sideways, he would virtually disappear. This slim and super-fit McGrath is all down to rigorous diet – including 24-hour fasts – and training pursued with an almost religious zeal.

It’s entirely in character, of course. McGrath has never done half-measures and he’s resilient despite having to close two restaurants last year. He’s certainly intense and he’s quite frank about his obsessive streak – the very thing that led to that Michelin star at Mint in Ranelagh, a rare feat in Ireland back then.

“It was a hugely creative time for me and the team,” he says. “The work ethic was phenomenal. I saw Mint was a stepping stone and it was a tricky location. I was working very hard to move it somewhere more suitable but those possibilities shut down as soon as the crash came.”

A television documentary about Mint, called *Pressure Cooker*, led to criticism of his treatment of staff and he admits that the kitchen was “hardcore”. But he points out that five of the team went on to Noma in Copenhagen, a restaurant regularly crowned Best in the World by Restaurant magazine.

“My grandad was a chef in the army,” he says. “He was so cool that I decided to be a chef when I was seven. I went to catering college in Belfast and found a real passion, a focus. My obsessional mind meant that I was very good. Then, when I was 21, I arrived in the kitchen at Roscoff.”

This was Northern Ireland’s first Michelin star – earned in 1991 – and for a long time, its only one.

“I’d grown up in a conflict in Belfast. And here I was in Roscoff at the bottom of Sandy Row. And I was the only Catholic in the kitchen until a lad from Derry arrived.”

Encouraged by Roscoff’s Paul Rankin, McGrath “really caught the bug – I knew it was going to demand so much of my life and you can’t be half-arsed about it.

Looking at a plate there was a reward – why was it good? Why did the flavours work? I craved knowledge.”

After a stint with Conrad Gallagher in Dublin, he moved to L’Ortolan, John Burton-Race’s two-Michelin-starred restaurant just outside London. “It was tough but it was great. Six-day weeks, plenty of bollocking but you learn loads with a team who had worked in all the top places. You didn’t know what you didn’t know but you soon found out.”

Then it was back to Dublin for a year at the Commons under Aiden Byrne before heading to London and Tom Aikens in Chelsea. Aikens he describes as “a very hardcore chef at the time”; in 1999 Aikens resigned from Pied à Terre after a teenage member of the crew was allegedly deliberately burnt with a hot knife.

“He had a very particular method of training and it informed mine when it came to getting results. It was like a Premier League football team: just think of Roy Keane on the pitch fighting for every blade of grass. I had friends who worked for Joël Robuchon in Paris and



After the closures last year McGrath is focusing his efforts on Fade Street Social: “We’re making it the best it can be while Dublin recalibrates itself”

there was never a smile, never a word out of place – it was deadly serious, genuinely like French military service. Marco [Pierre White] and [Gordon] Ramsay created that kind of environment in London too.”

After two and a half years – during which it earned a Michelin star and was named the seventh-best restaurant in the world – McGrath was made head chef at Tom Aikens.

“When you mature, you realise that hardcore is not for everyone, you have to soften to create a learning environment, but back then with the pressure, you couldn’t say, ‘Sorry I screwed up the fish, it’ll be another half an hour.’”

But London didn’t feel like home, and when given the opportunity to take over Mint he accepted the offer. “I knew Dublin would be a challenge, I just didn’t know how much. I had the confidence, sure, or maybe the naïveté of youth. We got the star and we kept it for two years until the crash in 2009. Then it was all about reinventing because the market had changed.”

He entered a business partnership with Vincent Melinn and started asking: “Can I do places that are just fun and cool? It was very different but I’ve always been a grafter. You have to adapt.”

First came Rustic Stone, then Brasserie

Sixty6 and high-end sushi at Bonsai. Fade Street Social came next and then the short-lived Shelbourne Social in Ballsbridge, a venture in which he and his partner misjudged both the market and the building. Mixed reviews – including a less than enthusiastic one from me – reflected the fact that the premises were too big and very challenging to work. Richard Corrigan would later discover the same after he too invested millions into the site, opening the equally short-lived Park Café. Shelbourne Social was an expensive effort that tried to be all things to all diners (with a menu that ranged from chicken wings to a €120

steak for sharing). By the time Covid struck, McGrath was responsible for 250 employees and for Shelbourne Social it was the final straw.

“Covid changed everything – it was like going to war. You spend years building momentum and relationships with customers and suppliers, then bang! If something isn’t performing it has to go. And all the optimists were saying it’s going to be like a light switch – it’ll come back on. But human nature isn’t like that. Then we have all the overheads, monthly energy bills going from, say, €10,000 to €40,000. That’s an awful lot of parmesan chips! I think of Mint and

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remember I used to worry about getting the turbot straight on the plate.”

He continues: “All of a sudden we’re wondering where the customers have gone. We just had to figure out what to do. Be optimistic but not foolishly optimistic, and I’m blessed to have my brother Billy with me in the business. It’s now just Fade Street and just Billy and me, and it’s a real departure from fine dining. The food is very approachable, giving people what they want, three or four flavours on the plate. And it’s a really big venue, bars, cocktails, DJs, a lot of stuff to learn. We’re making it the best it can be while Dublin recalibrates itself.”

And it’s essential to be present, he says, which was something that frustrated him hugely during the brief life of Shelbourne Social. Excruciating back pain after surgery rendered him unable to walk. “Every few weeks I’d be genuinely crippled and it was incredibly hard to get on top of it. I was comfort eating and I shot up to 22 stone. Eventually I found a surgeon who would give me epidural shots – I wouldn’t do painkillers – and I was able to get fit again and lose all that weight.”

When pressed, he admits that he has managed to lose ten stone “with a lot of discipline” and recalls how he had to learn how to walk again “up and down some steps at the back of the Mater hospital”.

McGrath’s ten-year-old son Oscar was the inspiration and, in a sense, the co-creator of his debut cookbook, *Dad Food*, which appeared last year. Father and son enjoy cooking together and although Oscar lives with his mum he stays over with his dad several times a week.

“There’s soccer practice and matches on Saturdays and I grab him from school on Fridays. Family for me is key. That’s what the restaurant is about – providing for people. My sister has two kids and my brother has two kids and the cousins are all mad about each other. Later this year we’ll be all off on holiday together.”

As we talk over lunch, McGrath relishes Graham Neville’s cooking – scallops followed by free-range pork – and eats lots of bread, something he usually avoids as part of his weight and fitness regime. However, he declines a glass of wine, sticking instead to mineral water.

“Look,” he reflects, “life is not all one way – no matter who you are, from fame to challenging situations, it’s up and down. What really matters is how you react to the challenges. We all experience them – anxiety, insecurity, moments of anger, frustration. For me, when it gets tough you have to stay positive but you can’t afford to be naively, unrealistically positive. That’s why we closed the two restaurants. Circumstances change, customers change, and you just have to go with the people, give them what they want. Sounds simple, doesn’t it?” And he laughs.