



McGrath says his new Japanese restaurant sets out to explore the 'five flavours'

McGrath's new Taste is a feast for the senses

Dylan McGrath, a few years ago, was wont to complain that "critics don't get Rustic Stone". Having read most of my contemporaries' reviews — and having undertaken two myself for different publications — I thought at the time he was wrong. Oh yes, we got it all right. Individually, we just didn't have much of a time there. I must say that, to Dylan's credit, and unlike certain other individuals whose brainchildren I'd assassinated, he didn't seem to bear a grudge. I bumped into him on George's Street after my second review and we had a civilised chat.

Anyhow, that's all in the past, though it'd seem curious to be entering Rustic Stone for a third visit. It was a Thursday night and the place was heaving, which is perhaps an indicator that the public doesn't give a toss about critics' opinions. There might be something in this. Sometimes critics overestimate their influence and, if we have any value, it's that we may succeed in pointing the public towards somewhere that they may have not come across. Our other duty is to entertain, perhaps provoked by some elegant prose employed in the expression of unrestrained enthusiasm for a good restaurant — or maybe the satisfaction of a bloodlust stimulated by a bad one.

On this occasion, accompanied by the Food Nymph, my friend and chief mentor on all things Japanese, I bypassed Rustic Stone, heading straight upstairs to dine in the recently opened Taste, where I had tried to get a table on a couple of previous occasions and failed. Although the word "table" is something of a misnomer in our case as we were seated on high stools at the bar. We were pleasantly greeted, not least by the head honcho himself, clad in his whites and busy working with a couple of his (Japanese) chefs.

The ethos of Taste at Rustic is clearly set out in the menu-come-brochure. It is, says Dylan, an exploration of the five tastes — sweet, sour, salt, bitter and the mysterious umami, the sensation we crave without fully understanding. He goes on to express the hope that we will "experience them in a subtle way and understand the difference between flavour and taste". So, it seems there's a learning curve to be negotiated here, en route to — hopefully — a stellar gastronomic experience. Interesting, but perhaps a bit of an ask, I mused.

For the most part I left the choice of food to the nymph, only intervening to ensure we got a portion of the glazed sticky pork. While we were studying the menu, a complimentary dish arrived, a brick temaki, basically a pastry cone filled with a dice of fresh, raw fish with truffle added, palate-pleasingly good and whetting our appetites for what was to come.

There are three set menus, or omakase, each specifically chosen to give diners the whole taste spectrum and priced at €37, €50 and €70. The Food Nymph, however, felt confident enough to leap past these and proceed directly to the a la carte, summoning a selection of sushi, which our waiter said were best enjoyed in combinations of three. The first of these, a kabayaki eel nigiri, was glazed with “a classic tare sauce” as well as toasted sesame seeds. This prompted a memory of a Japanese friend telling me, years ago, that, in her family the tare, a thick, sweet, soy-based sauce was kept in a pot at the back of the stove. When it ran low her grandmother made more and added it to the pot. In this way the sauce was passed on through the generations. I was never sure if she was winding me up. Next was a nigiri of native prawn, anointed with a sweet lobster butter. The John Dory with lime added the sour element to the trio.

In between, we nibbled on roasted baby artichokes, lollipops for the savoury inclined and, in order to add a little bulk to our sense stimulation, snacked on spuds, two kinds — tiny potatoes baked in salt and deriving intense aromatics from proximity to limequats (I hadn't heard of them either) and potatoes poached in “a light wasabi cream”, rolled in Japanese breadcrumbs.

All the while our crispy pork was getting ever crisper, perched atop a tiny barbecue. We tended it by turning until the desired degree of universal crispness was achieved, divided the piece in two and scoffed it, giving the pieces a twirl in kimchi. Then we finger-fought to scrape the last shards off the dish. Small beignets of short rib arrived, partnered with a roasted artichoke purée.

And so to our main, a pot of rich broth perched on a burner. We were advised to keep the flame down. Into this simmering stock we tossed baby carrots and, at length, enotaki, those white pin head mushrooms the Japanese love, to join the ginger, pickled mushroom and garlic already lurking under the surface. Finally we drowned the sliced pigeon that had been awaiting its fate, resting on a shroud of leaves. It reminded me of one of those folk songs where a sailor, after an heroic campaign, is consigned to the deep by his shipmates. We should have said a short prayer but didn't. Segments of roasted pineapple restored the sweet theme.

We just about managed dessert, taking the smoked cheesecake. This came with soya caramel, salted caramel (here we go again), banana and a scattering of frozen pop corn. With this last item, the Food Nymph and I took issue. It seemed inconsequential, adding little if anything to the whole. Searching for appropriate alternatives, we came up with a brave one — pork scratchings. The cheesecake was lovely.

The bill came to €141.50, including what was to my mind the perfect foil for the food, a viognier from Le Paradou, plus three glasses of red. So did the food meet the chef's bold claim? Oh, my word, yes. I've had some great meals in Ireland this past twelvemonth but none where the excitement level reached such heights. This is the Dylan McGrath of old, as in Mint days, teasing and torturing our senses with each successive mouthful. Food for the mind, as well as for heart and soul. Never having been to Japan, I don't know whether this stuff is authentic, what's more I don't care. Taste sees Dylan using a rainbow palette of flavour components to paint a vivid gastronomic picture and that's good enough for me.

