

Sunday Business Post

Show me the flavour

29 November 2009 By Ros Drinkwater

‘We’re very lucky, we’ve had an excellent year.’ These are words rarely uttered by a restaurateur in the middle of a recession but, in Neven Maguire’s case, luck has little to do with it. At two in the afternoon, he isn’t close to being halfway through his working day. In addition to running one of the most successful restaurants in the country, he has a punishing schedule of cookery demonstrations and charitable work, has just completed a TV series, and has published his seventh book.

The tiny village of Blacklion in Co Cavan is the centre of Maguire’s world; he has no ambition to head off to Dublin or to open a chain of MacNean’s. Like Darina Allen, he’s one of a family of nine. He learned to cook at his mother’s knee when his parents ran what was then MacNean’s Bistro.

‘I began cooking here when I was 12 and, by that time, I knew I wanted to be a chef. My mother was my inspiration, she was a wonderful cook - and still is,’ says Maguire.

Those were difficult times and, at an early age, Maguire saw the sharp end of the business. ‘Being right on the border during the Troubles, come July 12 my parents were lucky if they got ten diners a night.’

After training and experience abroad, Maguire took over in 2003 and quickly garnered award after award. In 2007, he doubled the restaurant’s seating capacity to 60, developed ten luxurious guestrooms and extended the menu to feature his award winning dishes.

Today, 70 per cent of his customers make the long journey from Dublin, and the restaurant books out months in advance. During our conversation, a man comes in to make a reservation for a party of ten, and my ears prick up at the date he requests - December 2010. Maguire is quick to point out that they do get cancellations.

Unlike so many macho chefs, Maguire is a gentle man and softly-spoken; you can’t imagine him losing his cool, let alone resorting to four-letter expletives. His strength is his infectious passion for food combined with a good business head, crucial in an industry where no restaurant has more than a one in five chance of survival.

‘In February, we called in a consultant. My wife, Amelda, and I have learned a huge amount from him - how to fine-tune costs without compromising on quality, looking at every angle from wine, staff and food to electricity supplies, and even the Visa machine, because different banks give different rates,’ he says.

‘From a chef’s point of view, I now have two suppliers for everything, two fish, two meat and so on. We only buy prime ingredients, but competition plays a huge part in the equation when you’re purchasing. The whole operation is very much a team, we’ve a staff of 25 -13 full time, and we’ve laid no one off - in fact, we’ve taken on a restaurant manager. I’m very proud of that.’

Seventy per cent of Maguire’s time is spent in the kitchen and 30 per cent on his other activities. His day starts at 8.30am, making breakfast for his overnight guests.

This, in itself, is surprising - very few top chefs cook breakfast - but Maguire wouldn’t miss it: ‘It gives me a chance to say goodbye to my customers and thank them. That’s important.’

Three times a week, he goes to the gym for an hour - "If I didn't, I'd be like a Teletubby; I'm always tasting," - and then it's back to the kitchen for a shift that ends around 1.30am.

The Maguire menu is all about tempting - and satisfying - the senses. As he puts it:

"You eat with your eyes and your nose, but flavour's the thing."

While he is famed for a handful of signature dishes, such as Study of Shellfish, a sublime combination of poached sea oyster, seared sea scallop, Kataifi prawn and lobster ravioli, his menu changes with the seasons.

"I listen to my growers and suppliers," he says.

Over the years, his cooking style has evolved. At 21, when he won Young Chef of the Year, his taste was for the exotic - kangaroo, alligator and bison. Now that he's matured, his focus is local produce.

"Ireland has always been known for the quality of its beef and fish, but in recent years we've seen a revolution in eating habits.

With people travelling so much our palettes have become more sophisticated and we have all these farmers' markets and wonderful little artisan producers," he says.

"Myrtle Allen had a great deal to do with that, and Darina. Thanks to them, more chefs now take an interest in where their supplies are coming from. Regionality is so important. In France and Italy, each area has its own speciality - what we need to do is encourage our specialists, whether it's a local duck guy, or a cheese maker."

To Maguire, running a restaurant involves much more than food: "It's about giving the whole experience, having a thoroughly enjoyable, relaxed evening."

His learning curve is ongoing. Every year he and his chefs pool their tips and take a three-day busman's holiday. "Last year it was Rome, the year before Barcelona, and this summer ten of us went to London. We don't sleep five-star, but we eat five-star - the Fat Duck, L'Atelier and the Capital, where Eric Chavot has this very cool concept - you sit at the bar and they give you little portions of everything. We visit the markets: Smithfield in London, the fish market in Barcelona. That's how we all get our inspiration."

One of the fruits of his last trip is a tiny pre-dessert that I can vouch for - a white chocolate and champagne soup with raspberry sorbet, and thinly sliced pineapple poached in sugar water, passion fruit and lemongrass.

The big question right now is whether or not, come January and the new edition of the Michelin Guide, Maguire will find that he has been awarded a star. The inspector has visited, and spent an hour with him after the meal.

"He was very honest with me," says Maguire.

"He said: 'You know your biggest problem here? Getting a booking. You're by far the busiest restaurant we've been to.'

He took me up on my style and the way I use different cuts. I like to take one ingredient and do different elements of it, perhaps a little croquette, a little cheek pie. The inspector felt that was an area where I could fall down. He said: 'If you want a Michelin star, you have to tweak a few things, but it can be there for you'. In other words, I may have to simplify my food a little bit."

Maguire won't be disappointed if the star doesn't materialise. "It's great that they called on me, I really appreciate the recognition, but it can be a double-edged sword," he says. "A Michelin allocation is always a great benchmark - you know the food is going to be good - but it can also imply that your restaurant is expensive and formal, and it doesn't always pay the bills. Look at Mint in Dublin, it got a Michelin star and it closed.

"I admire the guide, I really do, but it's not why I cook. For me the accolade is having a full restaurant. For some chefs, it's the Holy Grail. A chef in France lost his star and took his own life - when you take cooking that seriously, it's tragic. I'm very passionate about what I do and I don't want to dismiss it in any way, but you have to have a life outside it. I have a beautiful wife, we hope to have a family, that's our goal."

Now 35, Maguire credits much of his success to the amount of encouragement and support he had in his youth from his family, his home economics teacher, Rae McMarrow (he was the first boy in his school to enrol for the class), Marian Campbell at Fermanagh College where he trained, and the chefs at the continental Michelin starred restaurants where he served his apprenticeship - Roscoff in Belfast, the Grand Hotel Restaurant in Berlin, Lea Linster in Luxembourg and Arzak in San Sebastian.

"Arzak was the only kitchen I've ever worked in that had a creator as a chef. Juan Mari Arzak didn't cook, he just created dishes for the menu. I'd never seen that. He had 27 chefs in his kitchen; only nine of them got paid, the rest stayed there for a year just for the experience."

Maguire's way of giving something back is his involvement with Agri Aware, the charitable agricultural awareness trust set up to foster a greater understanding between agriculture and the food industry.

"They have a scheme that's open to all secondary schools and organised through the home economics departments. I give demos and talks in the schools, and they have this brilliant healthy eating competition where the pupils have to submit recipes," he says.

"It gets young people thinking about food and where it's coming from. They visit suppliers, be it a farm, a cheese maker or a potato grower, and then they compile three recipes, a starter, a main course and a dessert." The first prize is a day spent at MacNean's.

As a means of combating childhood obesity, the scheme is a winner, and Maguire would like to see every school becoming involved.

"The ones that are, are very pro-active - they've removed the vending machines with their fizzy drinks," he says.

"But some schools still don't have decent facilities. When I first got involved four years ago, I was shocked to find kitchens with no equipment bar a microwave, and pupils eating pot noodles.

On the bright side, in the first year I joined they had 300 entries; this year, I think there were over 1,000."

The importance of getting young people involved in healthy eating was brought home to Maguire in 2001 when he represented Ireland at the Bocuse d'Or, the world cuisine competition.

“I went to the market in Lyon, and I have a lovely memory of watching a family of four - mother, father, boy and girl - opening oysters and eating them, there and then. I was blown away. Where else but France would you see that? It's so important for families to eat together. We always had Sunday lunch as a family, and that's a habit that's got a little bit lost.”

The US chef and author Anthony Bourdain tells in his memoirs of how, as an adolescent who ate nothing but hamburgers, he was turned on to good food by a bowl of vichyssoise served on the Queen Mary. The shock of soup being cold, and the subtlety of the flavours, opened Bourdain's eyes to the fact that food could be much more than fuel.

Maguire is on the same wavelength.

“A lot of families come to us for Sunday lunch, but we don't have a kids' menu - they get half-portions. I want them to eat really good quality food, so no chips. Food should be an experience and, the way I see it, those kids are my future customers,” he says.

Home Chef, Maguire's new book, addresses the fact that, in recession, more and more people are cooking at home. It's full of practical tips from how to sharpen a knife and how to use it, to what to look for in produce, and a host of mouthwatering recipes.

If, for some reason, Maguire had to cook anywhere but Blacklion, his first choice would be the French Laundry, Thomas Keller's three Michelin-starred restaurant in Yountville, California. “I love his philosophy,” he says. “It's all about originality and local food, making food exciting and a really relaxing experience.”

As to his own philosophy, he sums it up simply: “Love what you do. Cook with the seasons. Support your local producers. And, above all, listen to your customers. That's very, very important.”

Neven Maguire's MacNean House and Restaurant, Blacklion, Co Cavan, 0719853022, www.macneanrestaurant.com. Home Chef is published by Collins, €24.70