

HOME-GROWN TALENT

One thing I inherited from my mother was a love and respect for food, she was a wonderful cook," Neven Maguire recalled as he spoke with me recently.

The Cavan native has an inspiring passion for wholesome, tasty food and there is no doubt that his mother's talent – likely shaped by the task of having to feed nine hungry mouths, Neven's included – was well invested in the thirty-something chef who has authored five cook books, runs the legendary MacNean House & Restaurant in Blacklion and regularly trots around the country giving demonstrations to hundreds of drooling onlookers.

"As a family we all respected food because we knew the hard work that went in to producing a meal," he says. Even when Neven and his family went out for dinner in his younger years, he says that people used to comment on how well behaved the kids in his family were at the table. "We just enjoyed good, honest food and we respected it."

GLITZ AND GLAMOUR? NO THANKS...

Neven would generally be regarded as a celebrity chef, but his grounded and friendly demeanour mirrors his respect for produce and the people behind it. There is neither glitz nor glamour in his disposition, just raw passion and this is the talent he prizes most in the producers he has come to know and respect as a chef. "I've learned so much from my producers and growers. They are the people who I mention on my menu and that I can stand over," he says. "They are people that have a passion and a flair and are committed to producing only the best."

And to buy the best, you certainly don't

Neven Maguire, Ireland's favourite celebrity chef, speaks with Stephen Tormey about his passion for wholesome food, the importance of local produce and why more people should buy rib eye steak!

have to go very far. Neven sources virtually all of his produce locally and even when it comes to grocery shopping, both he and his wife Amelda shop local – although he readily admits that Amelda is more often than not landed with that particularly household responsibility. "Now my wife would do that, I'm not going to lie! I'm not at home as much as I'd like and it can be very difficult to get time in the house but what I've been doing the past number of weeks is working on my new book's recipes, so Amelda and I would cook a little bit during the day, maybe have lunch together, to try to get some time in the house," he says.

Now most women reading this will probably be thinking of trading in their hubby for a new 'Blacklion' model, but before you do anything drastic, read on!

"When I'm cooking at home, it may not be the most creative," he says. "We eat very simply. If I'm doing something simple for Amelda it could be a really tasty homemade burger made from a local butcher or it could be a toasted sandwich. It's not fancy and what I love is eating salad so I might do a nice pear with toasted pine nuts and maybe

some rocket – a very simple salad." Neven might call it simple, but you can bet your bottom dollar it's tasty!

THE KEY INGREDIENT

When he is in full swing, however, Neven believes that a dish should revolve around the main ingredient, "whether that's a really nice piece of meat or fish. Your sauce or garnish really shouldn't overcomplicate it, it should all work together," he says. "But you should be able to taste the flavour of the main ingredient and that should be the star."

Neven also maintains that you would be amazed at the sheer diversity of dishes that can be garnered from a single ingredient – all that's needed is a little imagination. "In the restaurant at the minute, we have a pork dish and we use a fillet of pork, a sausage of pork made from a local butcher, the cheek of pork and we make a little sausage with black pudding, we use the ears of the pig and we breadcrumb them and crisp them up and then we serve the belly – one smoked and one rolled and braised, so it's different elements but one ingredient," Neven continues.

NEVEN'S BEST CUTS

You can also get creative when you're buying your ingredients and with people eyeing prices more than ever, Neven has some great tips for getting the best cut possible at your local butcher. "Meat is not a cheap ingredient and it shouldn't be – if it's quality meat, you should be prepared to pay for it. If you want to do a steak for dinner, try a rib eye steak. Rib eye is one of these fashionable cuts but it's a beautiful cut – if it's well hung and well matured, it's as good as it gets.

"Lesser used cuts, for example the cheek of beef, are also great. This is one of the

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cheapest cuts you can use and in the restaurant, we brown it in the pan and cut it down small and then put it in some stock, vegetables, red wine and herbs. We braise that for about four and a half or five hours and we serve that with our fillet steak in the restaurant and that works fantastically.

“The belly of pork has got very fashionable now, and the shoulder of lamb – they’re two cuts that I love and again, slow cooking. It’s the kind of dish you can make the day before and it tastes even better. The whole idea is the technique and how you cook it – that it’s slowly cooked, that it’s falling off the bone and you could eat it with a spoon,” he says.

Good value for money has been key to Neven’s success in MacNean House over the years, in tandem with his resolute insistence on ‘the best, and no less’ when it comes to the quality of food and service provided.

“People are very price-conscious, we have to give quality and value for money and they are the two key things we have always offered. For example, in the restaurant people can stay for dinner – and that’s a seven course menu – with one night B&B for €140 and that’s why we’re

busy,” he says. “In the past four or five years we’ve only increased our prices slightly and we’re happy with that. We always want people to come back and feel as though they’ve had a great experience.”

FEEDING FAMILIES

Neven is also a great fan of the family environment. Aside from catering for 27 family members on Christmas Day just gone (a yearly feat he thoroughly enjoys), he welcomes families into MacNean House, but laments the country’s general perception of food.

“Food isn’t about just being fuel, it should be an experience, something you sit down to with your family. I really admire the French and Italian way of eating as a family, that’s something that has been lost,” he says.

But, he argues, things are changing for the better. We’ve all heard the money-mantra of everything happening in cycles, but it would seem that the same theory applies to food. “Sometimes people don’t value really good food and the hard work that’s in it, but I think over the years it’s changed a lot,” Neven says. “We opened in ‘73 and it’s changed so much. When I go back to when my mother was cooking, it was all about ingredients, and then for a few years I used to cook mad things like ostrich, alligator and buffalo. I’ve done a total full circle now, it’s all about the local producer and people want to know where their food is coming from – that is the future of food.” ■

***TOP TIP!**
Good food doesn't have to be fancy. It's all about the ingredients so keep it simple.

On the grill with

Neven Maguire

If you weren't a chef, what would you be?

A professional footballer.

What is your favourite TV show?

Tubridy Tonight.

Where is your preferred place to dine out and why?

Any restaurant that uses the best seasonal, local ingredients and cooks from the heart!

If you were stranded on a desert island, what three things would you take with you?

My wife Amelda, a can opener and a box of matches.

What is your favourite free downtime activity?

Jogging in beautiful Blacklion.

What celebrity would you most love to cook for in your restaurant?

John Cleese from *Fawlty Towers*.

What's your favourite comfort food?

A big bowl of Irish stew.

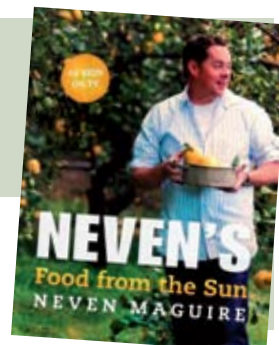
Where would your ideal holiday destination be?

Too many to choose from, but Thailand is one of my favourites.

What car do you drive?

Volkswagen Touareg, the best driving vehicle I have ever had.

Neven’s new TV series, ‘*Neven’s Food from the Sun*’ is currently being broadcast on RTE 1 every Wednesday evening at 7.30pm. The series follows Neven’s latest collection of recipes also titled ‘*Neven’s Food from the Sun*’ which is available in all good bookstores.



To win an autographed copy of Neven’s latest book, send your details to competitions@youandyourmoney.ie before March 28.

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