

Meet the Chef

Damon McGinniss Art Deco Masonic Hotel

As the executive chef of one of Napier's top hospitality operations, Damon McGinniss is one very busy man.



Located in the heart of Napier sits the Art Deco Masonic Hotel featuring two establishments, the Emporium Eatery & Bar and The Rose Irish Pub, both of which McGinniss oversees the kitchen operations. Added to this there is also a function room that is able to cater a sit down dinner for around 120 people or a cocktail function for around 150 people.

The Emporium Eatery and Bar is known for its unique offerings and locally-driven, seasonal menu. It includes contemporary food designed for any time of the day like a twelve hour braised Hawke's Bay lamb shoulder with smoked kumara, goat cheese and port as well as fresh bay fish, buttered beans, cherry tomato salsa and vanilla parsnip.

Averaging around 170 covers a night just at the Emporium, the team in the kitchen are certainly kept on their toes in a kitchen best described by McGinniss himself as being rewarding and addictive but at times hard work. It wasn't always the plan to become a chef, but McGinniss feels that now he wouldn't have had it any other way and has become one of New Zealand's top chefs bringing a wealth of knowledge to the table with local and international experience.

"When I was a young kitchen hand I remember tasting my first restaurant made chocolate mousse, I was absolutely blown away with its rich flavour and

soft and silky smooth texture. I remember thinking to myself, man I have to learn how to do that. This was definitely the start of the passion to come," said McGinniss.

With the arrival of the Autumn season, McGinniss is finalising the Autumn menu moving away from the beautiful Golden Queens peaches and into the artichokes and yams. "I love working with herbs and spices like toasted cumin seeds, smoked paprika and fresh coriander. After a trip to the USA, I have started to experiment at home with charcoal barbecuing. Without a doubt it's my favourite cooking technique and it is my next little project to bring charcoal cooking into the restaurant."

It isn't just the flavour that McGinniss loves about the cooking technique, it is also the connection to the food, whilst cooking with a raw natural product.

Being a self-confessed sweet-tooth, there is no shortage of desserts on the menu. Not only is there a sticky-date pudding with macadamia ice cream but also a caramelised espresso brulee with vanilla and hazelnut cookies and a sesame brandy snap among several options. It may have been a chocolate mousse that got him into the industry, but a rich well-made tiramisu is keeping McGinniss in it, with the chef's favourite dessert often featuring on the menu.



After travelling around New Zealand working for various establishments, McGinniss has always had a keen interest in bold complex flavours and it has become a signature of his dishes. "I can't stay away from Asian flavours, so I would say these would stay close to me and my menus over the years."

When it comes to ensuring quality of his dishes



night after night, you will rarely find McGinniss at home. "I am at work a lot. It's really hard for any chef that cares about the product and the end result to let go. I know that my team cares about what makes it to the plate and what doesn't and I am lucky to have a great consistent team in the kitchen. We are a large operation that opens 16 hours of every day. Hard training and trust in your team is what it takes."

To date, his biggest accomplishment would be still enjoying being a chef after all these years.

"It's a hard relentless career and you have to have physical and mental balance to last. But it's also very addictive and, strangely, very enjoyable."

Over the years, McGinniss has developed a more open mind about different cultures and cuisines and become comfortable in his own chef jacket preparing dishes that are full of flavour and uncomplicated. "I am always open to trying things and understanding the story behind why ethnic food, for example, might be done a certain way. It's amazing really the deeper you go. Being a 'rockstar' chef isn't on the menu anymore, I feel confident in the dishes I believe in and am passionate about, with lots of flavour and keeping things as uncomplicated as I can."

When he first started out, McGinniss had been working in the industry for around two years before joining top chef Steven Morris in his kitchen who, at the time, had recently won New Zealand Chef of the Year for the second time in a row.

"Prior to joining Morris in the kitchen I thought of myself as a great chef, who knew, maybe not everything, but a lot. He soon proved to me that I had a lot to learn when it came to cooking. Working in his kitchen was definitely tough and a challenge. I did learn the most in that kitchen though, working 12-13 hour days, six days a week for two years. It has certainly paid off, and I still very much have a passion and care for what I do in the kitchen and what is served to diners."

Going forward there are always new ideas and projects in the works at the hotel and adjoining establishments that continue to push and develop McGinniss and his team to new levels. "I am very fortunate to work with people and owners that have a lot of drive and are always looking to go forward." I&C

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