

## Neven Maguire (RTE Guide – December 2009)

*Neven Maguire's Home Chef* starts on RTÉ One on January 7

Neven Maguire is not what you'd expect from a celebrity chef. Polite, personable and without a bad word for anyone, the 37-year-old Cavan man seems almost too good to be a true blue kitchen devil. But he is the real deal, not only a great cook but a genuinely nice guy. "With me what you see is what you get," he says as if at loss as to how else he might describe himself. And if that phrase is hackneyed, it fits Maguire perfectly, a chef whose award-winning restaurant has put Blacklion on the culinary map and made a star of its unassuming yet ambitious proprietor. "I don't want to be the best there is," he says. "I want to be the best that I can be."



Blacklion is a quiet country village on the northern edge of County Cavan. Neven Maguire was born and reared here in a three storey building that was once an old Garda station and is now McNean House and Restaurant. Voted Food and Wine magazine's Restaurant of the Year 2008, it is a homely establishment with Neven's wife, Amelda, working front of house. The couple live a few miles outside the village in a stylish single-storey dwelling in which Maguire's last TV series (*Food From The Sun*) and his latest, *Neven Maguire's Home Chef*, was filmed. This series ties in with his seventh, and latest, cookbook of the same name: a user-friendly guide with recipes tried and tested in his restaurant where the local is treasured.

For Maguire home is the heart of the platter. At the age of 12 he was already helping his mother in the kitchen, in his mid teens he was working in the family business and in 2003 he took over as proprietor and chef at the restaurant. We meet here and get the first taste of Maguire's cooking and hospitality: shortbread biscuits topped with fresh raspberries and freshly ground coffee. Later, at his home, hand made chocolates are mysteriously magicked up. Neven, one quickly discovers, has a sweet tooth and despite his chef's passion and precision, he is refreshingly free of snobbery. "See I do eat beans on toast," he says with a grin as he flips open a kitchen press to reveal a stack of familiar tins

Neven Maguire is one of nine children, born to Joe and Vera Maguire. All the children had their chores. For Neven and his twin brother this was tending to the vegetable garden at the back of the house during summer. Vera, who still lives at the back of the house, ran the house and home. "My mother was trained in hotel management," he says. "When they started the restaurant in 1969 business was OK but the Troubles were desperate. There were two bombings and it was tough. So they had to close from '73 to '89. After the restaurant my mum did a B and B and my dad started a garage, I swear to God. It was just behind the restaurant." In 1989 the restaurant reopened. Joe Maguire swapped fixing cars for fixing meals. Vera ran the front of house and Neven, who was a student at Fermanagh College, worked evenings

in the kitchen. It was perhaps inevitable, even then, that he would eventually take over.

Cooking is in Neven Maguire's blood. His maternal grandmother, Susan, was a great cook and Neven was the first boy in his school to study Home Economics. "I got a lot of slagging but my Home Economics teacher was very supportive," he says. At sixteen, after completing his Group Certificate, he left school. Were his parents upset? "Not at all," he says. "I lived and breathed cooking." He applied initially for a place on a CERT course but was rejected. So he contacted Fermanagh College, got a place on the course and after graduating worked at the Roscoff (Belfast), the Grand Hotel and Restaurant (Berlin), Lea Linster (Luxembourg) and The Arzak (San Sebastian). Back at home he lectured at his old alma mater, worked nights at the family restaurant and in 1998 was appointed the chef for RTÉ's new afternoon show, Open House. "That was a big break for me," he says. Meanwhile the awards piled up: Eurotoque Young Chef of the Year (1999), Gold Medal Award Winner (2001) and Jameson Chef of the Year 2004 and he represented Ireland in the Bocuse d'Or World Cuisine Competition in 2001.

Although all these achievements are listed on his website, Maguire is no slave to Michelin stars. "It's not what cooking is about," he says. "To me it is all about giving people a real nice experience, it's about really good food and a really good service without feeling ripped off. We're so well booked up at that moment, that's as good as any Michelin star to me that people travel here from all over the country to wee Blacklion." He believes in being hands on. "I'm a big believer in doing one restaurant and doing it right," he says. "I have had offers to go elsewhere, including Chelsea Football Club, but it never really interested me. It genuinely wasn't about the money and that's something coming from a Cavan man. I wanted to stay in Blacklion where I have a certain quality of life although Amelda might argue with that."

Neven first met Amelda in a night club in Enniskillen in Christmas 2000. "I missed my opportunity that time," he says. But he got a second chance in Galway a year later. "I bumped into Amelda in a nightclub there and the rest is history," he says. "The next day we went to the Cliffs of Moher on our first date. It was a really windy day and Amelda kept falling down the steps. Or maybe she was just head-over-heels in love with me. Hahaha." Their first dinner date was at Bang Café in Dublin. The first meal he cooked for her was a pasta dish. They got married on December 23, 2007, and during their honeymoon the restaurant was dramatically refurbished to the tune of €500,000. "It was a lifetime investment," he says. "The kitchen alone cost €180,000."

Joe Maguire was killed in a road accident in 1999. He was just 59 years old. At the time the family were also running a café in Sligo. "Dad was driving down to Sligo and the other driver fell asleep at the wheel and ran into him," says Neven. "He lived through the weekend but there was too much internal damage. That was the toughest time of my life. I suppose our religious faith got us through. I like going to mass and have a great faith and belief. My mum was so heartbroken, to be married for so long and then to lose her husband so cruelly. I focused my energies into my work. There were days that I'd cry. Now the greatest compliment that anyone can pay to me is 'you're just like your father'. I never want him to be forgotten because he and mum were the heart and soul of the restaurant."

Like any successful chef, Maguire is a driven man and a canny business person. "You have to be driven, you have to be committed and you have to love what you do," he says. "I love food, I love talking about food, I love eating food and I love cooking for people. I'm very much hands on." Such dedication takes time and takes its toll. "We would love to have our family and we need to prioritise that," says Maguire when asked about the likelihood of him and Amelda having a family. "Sometimes I can't say no to demos and things like that but I need to make time for ourselves. It can be very difficult. Isn't that right Amelda?" Beside him his wife shifts in her seat. "Hopefully when we do have children things will have to change because at the moment we'd be lucky to have one or two nights a month together in the house," she says.

Every year Maguire takes his kitchen staff for a short break. The emphasis is always on food. Last year they went to Rome, this year it was London and an itinerary that included Gordon Ramsay's Royal Hospital Road, Joel Robuchon's L'Atelier and the Ledbury. It was both pleasure and work - the line between the two can be very fine for cooks. On these visits Maguire always takes notes, checking out the credo and creations of the kitchens. "Wait until you see this," he says and pops out of the room, re-emerging a few moments later with sheets of paper. They bear the hieroglyphics of his visits to other restaurants, rough sketches of dishes annotated with notes and ideas. As he shows them off, he glances at his wife. "Amelda thinks I'm very sad," he says and laughs jollily.

Later we sit down to a truly wonderful meal at McNeen House. In the buzzing kitchen Maguire marshals his team with relentless efficiency but without histrionics. At one point in this interview he recalls an occasion when he ate at a celebrity chef's restaurant in London and where, even in the dining room, he could hear the man bawling out his kitchen staff. "That was very bold," he says with shake of his head. And so not Neven Maguire. Hospitable to the tips of his fingers, he briefly steps out of the heat of the kitchen to give us directions on the quickest way home. "For me as a chef you're only ever as good as the last meal that you cooked," he says. "And that's really what keeps you going."