

TABLE FOR TWO

AIDEN BYRNE

Aiden Byrne left Living Ventures in January to open D&D London's first Manchester restaurant, 20 Stories. The Liverpool-born chef also owns The Church Green gastropub in Lymm, Cheshire

Words Sophie Witts

WHY DID YOU DECIDE IT WAS TIME TO LEAVE LIVING VENTURES?

I stepped away from being in the kitchen full-time at Manchester House several months ago because I was at the stage where I wanted to take on a bigger challenge. I thought I would find that by taking on a group creative role with Living Ventures, but we both wanted different things. I've left on amicable terms, there's no animosity. Manchester's too small for that.

SO WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH D&D LONDON?

My title is chef director of the north, so I'll look after 20 Stories, the company's four sites in Leeds and any future launches. D&D is looking at opening other sites in the north, potentially Liverpool and Scotland, so that's where I fit in.

TELL US ABOUT 20 STORIES...

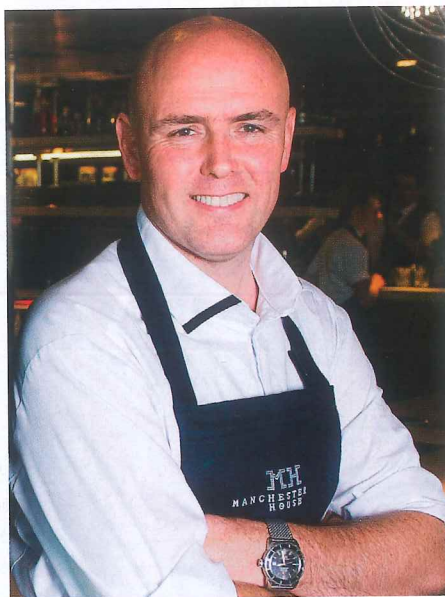
It's a 10,000sq ft site that will have two restaurants totalling 300-covers. There will be an 80 to 90-cover fine dining restaurant and a grill - the latter won't be too dissimilar to what we do at my pub. A lot of chefs who focus on fine dining don't have time for the more relaxed side of food, but I'm passionate about both. The grill will run all-day on weekends with a big focus on Sunday lunch to try and make it as family-friendly as possible. The fine dining side will close on Sundays.

HOW MUCH FREEDOM IS D&D GIVING YOU?

When it came to the style of the food and the concept it was 'whatever you want to do Aiden, it's entirely up to you'. D&D finds specialists in their field and let them do what they want. They're not puppeteers. They give you the freedom to go off and make the business a success. I've been in Manchester for five and a half years now and, being a northern boy myself, I've got a better idea of what the Manchester crowd wants than D&D does.

SO WERE YOU TEMPTED TO GO IT ALONE?

I run my own business anyway with my pub and it doesn't do any harm to get involved with someone with D&D's track record. I get excited working with like-minded people and would rather surround myself with people with the same aspirations as me and take that forward.



ARE YOU AIMING FOR A MICHELIN STAR FOR THE FINE DINING RESTAURANT?

It's not something that's going to be my main focus when I get out of bed each morning. We want to make it accessible and for it to be a successful business. We haven't even had the conversation about it. So no, we're not aspiring to get a star, but if one comes we won't say no to it. We're just going to cook our hearts out and if it comes it comes.

THERE WAS A LOT OF BUZZ AROUND MANCHESTER HOUSE GETTING A STAR AFTER YOU OPENED IN 2013, WHAT WAS THAT PRESSURE LIKE FOR YOU?

When we opened, we did a BBC Two TV programme called *Restaurant Wars: The Battle for Manchester* and it was all about trying to get a star. But to begin with we didn't know that was what the programme was going to be called and we certainly didn't think the possibility of a Michelin star was going to be the main focus. Obviously, jeopardy makes for good TV, but I think they manipulated it to our detriment. The pressure put on us by the press - every time the Guide came out and Manchester didn't achieve what the TV programme set out - was intense. Michelin wasn't our main focus, we just wanted to create a really strong restaurant in a city that was short on fine dining. Manchester House was

busy until the day I left and I'm sure under young Nat (new head chef Nathaniel Tofan) it will continue to be.

WHAT'S GOING TO BE ON THE MENU AT 20 STORIES?

The grill will be pretty much everything that you would see on the menu in my pub - cottage pie; fish and chips; and smoked haddock with poached egg and mustard hollandaise. It will be easy, accessible well-cooked food. We're not doing a tasting menu in the fine dining restaurant, however, just a la carte with a choice of seven starters, mains and desserts. The menu will likely include rabbit and langoustines with carrot and green olives to start and a main of barbecued turbot wrapped in Savoy cabbage with morteau sausage.

ARE YOU STAFFED UP YET?

I've got a really strong sous chef to run the restaurant side and a strong chef - who unfortunately I can't name yet - to run the grill. The restaurant chef was with me for many years; he's been away cooking in a two-star Michelin restaurant, but has come back. My brother Louis is going to run the prep kitchen for both. The quality of the products will be the same for each venue. We're want to shout about Manchester and produce from the region. The majority of our beef will be coming from a national park in Yorkshire, and we're going to do all our own butchery and fish prep. We've also got a farm in Cheshire which we'll use to grow our own salads and - eventually - our own veg.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW ON MANCHESTER'S DINING SCENE IN 2018?

I love it. I feel very proud to be part of the buzz that's there at the moment. It's just getting stronger and stronger. We're waiting for the bubble to burst, but perhaps it won't. There are so many big operators who are looking at Manchester and the north in general.

ARE THERE ANY CITIES YOU'D PARTICULARLY LIKE D&D TO EXPAND TO?

Liverpool. I'm excited about the prospect of opening a restaurant in my home town. Watching what D&D is doing in Manchester has filled me with confidence in the relationship going forward. ■