

‘Those working in the industry have shown themselves to really be the amazing people they are’

Gary Maclean, winner of MasterChef: The Professionals among many other accolades talks to **Liv McMahon** about his pride at the the response of those in the hospitality industry to the pandemic and his optimism that life after lockdown will see the good times come back for restaurants and hotels

By the time I speak to Gary Maclean in the early afternoon, he's already been to LA, New York, Chicago and Texas. Virtually, that is. Having been given the title of Scotland's National Chef in 2017, after winning Masterchef: The Professionals in 2016, Gary has been cooking up a storm around the world both in the years prior and even more since. And despite the small matter of a global pandemic, the star chef shows no signs of stopping any time soon. "As much as I've been stuck in my dining room, I'm all over the world every half an hour," he says, adding "I've made a lot of headway in the hearts and minds of our friends across the pond." Having not strayed far beyond my flat in Glasgow's east end for several months, I'm all too happy to indulge in his tales of travelling the globe – virtual or otherwise. "His favourite spot to visit? "If I was really pushed, I'd have to say New York," says Gary. "It's really easy to work there as a chef, everyone is really helpful and the kitchens are big. Plus, I always end up going on my own and finding myself there a bit."

Looking closer to home, however, sees Gary gush over the sheer amount of goodwill he's seen on display in Scottish hospitality over these difficult last few months. "I think those working in the industry have shown themselves to really be the amazing people they are," he says, "especially considering the year they've been through." "You saw chefs spring up instantly in March, getting out to do social stuff – everybody just felt the need to get online and share their recipes, share their thoughts. A lot of chefs started doing online tutorials too. "It just made me really, really proud to see everyone come together like that when the industry is at its lowest point." On a more personal note, Gary reflects on how lockdown made him more aware of the relentless nature of his, and other chefs', work. "I figured out really quickly that I'm actually a bit of a workaholic," he tells me. "I found that I literally could not stop. I was at my desk more and on my feet more than I'd ever been." This, he says, is likely true of many chefs across Scotland. "Your typical chef, particularly if they've been successful and are quite good at what they do, will have done a lot of hours – they'll probably have done it since they were about 16 and have never had a week-end off," explains Gary. It makes complete sense to him, then, that so many chefs took to social media, started to work with local commu-



↑ Gary Maclean won MasterChef: The Professionals in 2016; the chef at work, main

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nities and began delivering food to people in need, when restaurant service ground to a halt. "It was an amazing time to see what people were made of," he says. But it of course brought its challenges as the hospitality sector was tasked with suddenly working week to week, unable to plan for weeks or months ahead as restrictions continue to chop and change in response to the rise and fall of Covid cases. For Gary, this seems reminiscent of his very origins as a chef: "I grew up in an area in Glasgow where there was mass unemployment and I didn't know anyone who had a job. None of my friends' dads had jobs or anything like that. And so I always thought to myself, 'at least people will always have to eat and I'll have a secure job in that'. And people will always have to eat, but when the pandemic struck, hospitality was the first hit." Indeed, 2020 has been a year of firsts after all with so many of our normal routines

and aspects of our daily lives thrown into flux. The creep of Christmas has been a stark reminder of this, with restaurants and venues fearful for how they will survive the typically low trade in January and February. "We usually rely on Christmas for being your money in the bank," says Gary, adding that the decreased footfall in city centres and strain on rural hotels and restaurants will have an even greater impact on businesses. He remains hopeful, though, that this upside-down year could see the post-Christmas lull overturned if plans for vaccinations work out as planned. "I think that if we can get back up and running in January and February, we could well be met with a wave of people who are just desperate to get out and appreciate something that's not their own house?" he muses. With this in mind, Gary says that he will no doubt miss having a house filled with people this Christmas but that he is still looking for-



↑ Dishes created by Gary Maclean include venison Wellington, above; a smoked salmon salad, right



ward to spending some quality time with as many family members he can. While he does take over the cooking, I'm surprised to learn that food does not take centre stage at a Maclean Christmas. "We go very traditional, no frills or anything like that. As with everything at Christmas, it's about family more than anything else." As for the year ahead, Gary

declares he is "really optimistic" for the industry in Scotland he is always proud to represent. "I think the world really has changed forever," he says, "and so many

people developed a passion for cooking in lockdown. So it's exciting to think that maybe it could see a whole new age of talent come into the industry."

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