

From Bolognese to Bodega – The Man Behind the Michelin

By Delaney Cha

Balancing three restaurants under his management and his menus, Jp McMahon's day-to-day life is filled with long tasks and fulfilling rewards. McMahon, a successful restaurateur, chef, and business owner, has been making his mark on Galway since opening his first restaurant Cava Bodega, in 2008.

"Galway is very much rooted in the arts. I always liked the bohemia side of Galway, and what really attracted me to the city was the different festivals that Galway has, with art, literature, and theatre," he says.

From a young age, Jp took an interest in food and the art that could be made from this delicious medium.

"I've always been interested in food, coming from a family of eight, feeding people always was a big part of the day," he says.

"I remember sometimes going out to restaurants and trying a few different things and liking it.

"I went to a restaurant sometime in the 1980s and I had spaghetti bolognese, I had never had pasta and I thought it was the most amazing thing I had ever had in my life," says Jp.

He first began cooking in a home economics class in school, when he was around 15 years old.

"I had the choice to take home economics or woodwork in school, and I chose home economics, and I liked it," he says.

"I was 15 when I had my first summer job and it was in a kitchen, and I liked it, I liked the buzz. I worked at an Italian restaurant the last two years of school. I suppose for a while, I knew I was going to become a chef."

Continuing his education, he studied English and Art History in college.

"I thought I wasn't going to cook anymore, that I had escaped. I spent a lot of time with Art History. Even when we opened up Cava [Bodega] in 2008, I was teaching an art history course," says Jp.

"I was always back and forth, on and off from working in restaurants in kitchens. I started working in kitchens during my last year of college and continued working in them when I finished. I began my PhD and started cheffing again and it was always a parallel journey between cooking and academia."

Jp currently has three restaurants in Galway; Cava Bodega, Tartare, and Aniar, which received a Michelin star in 2013 and has maintained the rating since.

Currently, he manages and oversees the functionality of the restaurants and will step in to cook a few times a week. He also offers cooking classes at Aniar, for both adults and children.

“The balance of work between the restaurants is very fragmented. Going from cooking, which is very regular, very routine, to managing the restaurants, it is very hard to distinguish where the day begins and where the day ends. I always find myself working,” he says.

“Managing is very administration heavy, because it is three restaurants, with different managers, different sommeliers, different head chefs.”

“Even while managing the restaurants, it’s important that I still cook, because it is what I identify with, and I feel like I’m doing nothing when I’m just managing the restaurants,” says Jp.

When he does choose to chef, preparation for meal service begins around 4pm, almost an hour before the restaurant begins to seat customers. Most of the preparation that is expected is checking over the menus and the reservations.

“If I am in Aniar, because it’s a Michelin star, we pay a little bit more attention to the guests that are arriving, where they are coming from, and their dietary restrictions.”

“From a service perspective between Cava and Aniar, Cava is more casual and very fast where Aniar is slow. It’s more of a symphony and I see myself as the conductor,” he says.

“My goal overall is to make sure that when I am not there, everything works well.”

Aniar, a fine dining restaurant that offers an 18-course tasting menu, specialises in a modern take of traditional Irish recipes and cuisine. Tartare is a wine bar that serves complementing dishes for each tasting, and Cava is a Spanish-inspired tapas restaurant. While Aniar was awarded the Michelin star, all three have been featured in the Michelin Guide as restaurants to visit in Galway.

The development of recipes and menus for the restaurants, even with their different styles and cuisines, usually comes from the same place.

“Inspiration can come from various bits, like online or cookbooks. It can come from the chefs as well at each restaurant. We are very open with our creativity. Seasons can dictate a lot. There may be a herb or vegetable that we may want to feature,” he says.

“For Cava, I try to go back to Spain every year to get more inspiration, and learn more ways to cook new things, to have new menu items.”

Jp also says that food culture can heavily influence a menu. Through his restaurants, particularly Aniar, he wants to modernise Irish cuisine and cooking and how people think about Irish food and its significance to Irish culture.

“Food is everywhere, and takes up a vast part of our lives, and to not identify it as a cultural experience can lessen that,” he says. “Ireland is a tourism destination, where food is not the first thing people think of when visiting. We can learn about food tourism from places and countries that benefit from it.”