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Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire
Dublin Institute of Technology, mairtin.Macconiomaire@dit.ie

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Pierre Rolland: Ireland's First Michelin Star Chef

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire Ph.D.
Dublin Institute of Technology, Mairtin.Macconiomaire@dit.ie

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PIERRE ROLLAND... Ireland's First Michelin Star Chef

Mairtin MacConomaire

Pierre Rolland was born 29th March 1912 in Frétillon in the Val-d'Oise near Paris. He had a tough childhood, his father died in the war and his mother re-married. He started work at 12 years of age in his stepfather's hotel. Later, he trained in the **Carlton Hotel in Cannes** where he remained after completing his apprenticeship until the war. He married **Margerite Gioanne,** from an Italian French family and had three children, **Georgette, Henri and Mireille**. During the Second World War he was not called for service as he had a family, and worked as a chef in the perfume industry in Grasse.

IN 1949 KEN BESSON the owner the Russell Hotel in Dublin offered him the position of head chef. Hector Fabron was the manager. Pierre moved to Dublin alone for six months and after that he brought his family over. The Russell Hotel under Rolland became renowned for the excellence of its food in Ireland. With Rolland as head chef, arrangements for formalising apprenticeship between Besson, Fabron and Michael Mullen of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union saw Irish boys being indentured in the Russell's kitchen in return for allowing French and continental chefs work in Dublin. In the 1950s and 1960s the Russell's reputation was world-class. Charlotte Adams in the SAS Cookbook (1960) names the Russell Restaurant as the best hotel restaurant in Dublin. She continues *'It obviously attracts the smartest and most chic natives and visitors. The menu is entirely international and the chef French. There is an unusually good wine list for these parts. I ate the most wonderful grilled lamb's kidneys with Irish Bacon and advise you to do the same if you find yourself in Dublin. There is nothing like Irish bacon anywhere else on earth. Service rather elegant. Expensive.'*

Pierre Rolland was an excellent leader, teacher and mentor according to the words of many of his young apprentices who went on to have rewarding careers. Bill Ryan recalls Rolland making fake truffles for buffet preparation from used coffee granules and duck fat, and his hats being delivered starched daily from the cleaners. Arthur Magee and Matt Dowling were both indentured in the Russell under Pierre Rolland and recall his professionalism, authority and ability to inspire his chefs and apprentices. In the late 1950s the Russell's manager was a Monsier Maurice Nayrolles and according to reports he was excellent. He was offered a very important position in the Bahamas where millionaires spent their holidays. He asked Pierre Rolland to go over to the Bahamas and to supervise all the kitchens for him. On the 4th October 1959 a farewell dinner was held in honour of Pierre in the Moira Hotel Dublin. In attendance were the city's leading chefs, managers and the trade union leader Michael Mullen. For the next seventeen years Pierre would winter in the Bahamas and summer in Europe.

Above: *Pierre Rolland, seated centre, with members of the Rusell Hotel brigade.*

Not accostomed to having time off, he turned his house at La Croix Val-Mer in the South of France into a restaurant. He ran it each summer for a number of years. He was enticed back to Dublin in 1962 by Ken Besson who had opened the Old Conna Hill Hotel. The hotel did not stay open long and he reactivated his relationship in the Russell in Dublin. The Russell catered for all state banquets and it was during this time that Pierre had the opportunity in June 1963 to cook for John F. Kennedy during his Irish visit. He presented President Kennedy with a pastillage replica of his PT Boat, which, during the Second World War, had been rammed by a Japanese destroyer. Rolland's daughter told me that he 'felt very proud of this experience'. Also, he was proud to have cooked for Charles de Gaulle.

In 1966 he cut his ties with the Bahamas and took up the position of head chef at the Hotel Cap-Eden-Roc in the south of France which even today is reputed to be the most expensive hotel on the Riviera. During this time he was awarded two Michelin stars. When the Michelin guide first covered Ireland in 1974, The Russell was the only restaurant in Dublin to be awarded one star under Matt Dowling who had worked his way up from Rolland's apprentice. Pierre Rolland retired to the Croix-Val-Mer and died on 28th December 1993. During his life Chef Rolland won the respect of all who worked under him, he won numerous awards and prizes in culinary competitions in Dublin and Torquay. He is remembered fondly in Dublin as one of the founding fathers of today's thriving restaurant industry.