

# CANARY

A photograph of a modern city park. In the foreground, a stone fountain with several water jets is visible. A woman in a grey suit and a man in a dark suit are walking past the fountain, their figures slightly blurred. The background features a large, modern glass skyscraper on the right and a white, curved building with many windows on the left. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Autumn 2002

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## man with a mission

JULIAN METCALFE, CO-FOUNDER OF PRET A MANGER AND FOUNDER OF ITSU, TALKS TO DARIUS SANAI

Julian Metcalfe is waving a small cardboard box in the air. The boxes, he says, are about to revolutionise lunch as we know it. 'These boxes will be filled with food that is fresh and absolutely delicious. It will be a wonderfully healthy, tasty, balanced meal containing salad, rice, and protein – everything you need. And there will be almost no fat whatsoever. They will cost from just £2.75 upwards. It's going to be amazing!'

Metcalfe is a passionate man. He is sitting in the basement kitchen of his home in Chelsea, playing with the prototype design of his Itsu Canary Wharf box, waxing lyrical about every aspect of his flagship restaurant which is due to open in Cabot Place East in September. He loves talking about detail – the detail of the boxes, the bar, the space he is creating.

The new Itsu will take the place of Moshi Moshi Sushi, in a radical revamp of the existing space that will see some of the walls knocked down and the restaurant extended to the far side of what was the kitchen. 'It's perfect for Canary Wharf, it's been on the cards for such a long time,' says Metcalfe. 'Canary Wharf needs somewhere like Itsu.'

If this sounds like just anyone trying to promote the restaurant they are

opening, be assured it is most definitely not. Metcalfe is one of Britain's food pioneers, the man who has already changed the face of lunch as we know it, who has enhanced the lives of millions of office workers around the globe, and a man who, having made himself extremely rich through his past endeavours, has no need to launch a restaurant serving top-class food at reasonable prices in Canary Wharf.

Metcalfe is one of the two men behind Pret A Manger, the new-wave sandwich bar that has become a national and a global phenomenon. The first establishment to offer ready-made sandwiches created the same day on the premises, with no queuing as your chosen order was made, Pret's rapid service, top-quality ingredients and inventive menus meant that lunch at your desk was never the same again.

Metcalfe and his business partner Sinclair Beecham launched Pret in 1986 when, working as a chartered surveyor, Metcalfe was irritated by the time it took to get a sandwich in his local lunch bar. Within a decade it had more than 100 outlets and had a global staff of more than 2,000.

Five years ago, while planning to launch Pret in the States, Metcalfe decided to open up a Japanese-style

restaurant, Itsu, in South Kensington. 'I have loved Japanese food since I was 18,' he says. 'The tastes! The purity, oh my god! And it's so healthy. In Japan you so rarely see anyone who is overweight. More and more people are now conscious of their health, and particularly so in somewhere like Canary Wharf where you have thousands of educated and affluent office workers. But they think that healthy food has to be tasteless – that's just so wrong!'

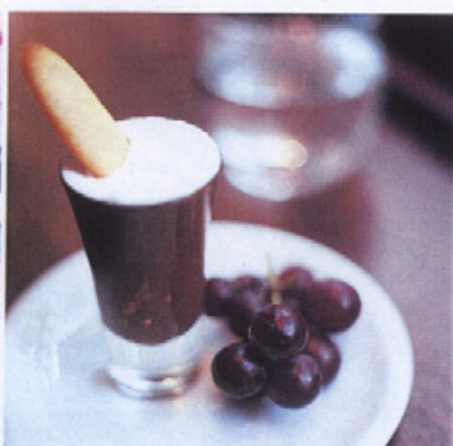
'Eating lunch or dinner without fat is so boring for most people, and that's ridiculous. You can eat delicious food without fat in it, which is something that most people don't realise.'

If Metcalfe sounds like a man on a mission, he is. He is sitting at his kitchen table, sipping a mug of coffee, jumping from one passionate belief to another like a man possessed. He is wearing an open-necked blue shirt and oblong glasses; tall, blonde and fit for his 42 years, he is also very active. Every few minutes he gets up and washes a mug, or wipes a surface, or the frame of the widescreen TV screen mounted on the wall, never once breaking his conversational stride. Metcalfe is surrounded by the trappings of his success. Striking modern art and sculptures adorn the walls; the 20-foot-long kitchen table is



ABOUT THE NEXT STEP IN HIS MASTER PLAN TO BRING HIGH-QUALITY, LOW-FAT FOOD TO THE MASSES





lined with designer chairs draped in white cloth, and the house, a detached mansion in an area full of smart townhouses, seems to go on forever. Yet it's eight in the morning and already he has a day packed with appointments.

Itsu, Metcalfe emphasises, was never intended to be a chain like Pret; the plan was not to have more than a handful of restaurants. The Canary Wharf establishment is the third, after

warm, with lots of oranges and greens.' He has deliberately used designers who are not restaurant outfitters, he says. The bar area, on the right as you go in, will be a 'proper bar' with a full cocktail list, comfortable seating and ambiance, and fully qualified bartenders.

The bar will bring to life an area of the Wharf that is rather quiet in the evenings, he says. 'It's terribly important for both us and for Canary Wharf.

They will be full meals with miso soup, noodles, fish, vegetables and sauces. There will be protein, vitamins, carbohydrates, iron, and virtually no fat.' He is very keen on sauces; each Itsu has three 'saucemasters' working on the premises. 'The idea is that anyone from a taxi driver to a partner in a consultancy will be able to choose a meal for their price range and have a delicious experience,' he says.

I ask Metcalfe whether he has any role models for Itsu. Not surprisingly, he says there is no direct comparison, as this is a unique concept in the UK. But more surprisingly, perhaps, given his commitment to healthy food, he says one of his icons is Pizza Express. 'There was an integrity about Pizza Express, it was one man's passion just to feed people with good-quality fuel, and I admire that,' he says. Though, he adds, 'times and needs have changed. An Itsu box has perhaps 10 per cent of the

## THE FOOD OFFERED AT ITSU IS BREATHTAKING IN ITS QUALITY AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL

South Kensington and Wardour Street in Soho, which have both been roaring critical and commercial successes, albeit after slow starts. 'People don't know what we are. Itsu is not a sushi bar. It is not really a restaurant either. It is a place serving top-quality Japanese, Vietnamese and oriental food efficiently and with good value.'

The food offered at Itsu is breathtaking in its quality and attention to detail. Organic tuna and salmon are seared briefly and coated in sesame; Chinese cabbage is steamed and coated in a delicious, satay-style peanut sauce; white crab meat is wrapped in oriental leaves and served with a soy-vinegar dip. Salads feature oriental leaves ('which can sometimes be amazingly hard to get hold of here,' Metcalfe says) with seared chicken and various combinations of lime, tamarind, chilli, peanut, coconut and soy dressings. Even the plain sashimi (raw fish) tastes phenomenal because of the quality of the ingredients.

'Canary Wharf deserves something fun and glamorous,' he says. 'The design will be exciting, wild and wonderful. There will be a great combination of texture and moods in the design, and the lighting will be soft and

There's no bar in our Soho site so it's no fun in the evenings. We are spending a fortune on building a proper bar, getting outside expertise in with the drinks. All the research says, don't put a bar there, you won't recoup the cost; but even if it contains only a few people drinking in the evenings, the bar is a commitment to making the food work. Even if you're just buying a takeaway, it helps the place feel right.'

Despite all this, Metcalfe says that the real excitement, for him, of Itsu in Canary Wharf is the take-out boxes. He has tried this on a smaller scale and with some success in the Wardour Street site, where office workers can grab boxes of food from shelves outside the restaurant and pay at a fast till just inside the entrance. 'But Canary Wharf has a much higher number of office workers,' he points out. People there will be able to drop in and buy boxes, and there will be a rapid delivery service to the whole area.

The boxes will start at £2.75 and go up to £8.50, and each, he says, will offer a full, balanced meal. 'They are not sushi boxes like you get elsewhere, with a little bit of salmon, a little bit of tuna, a little bit of omelette. I mean, who eats that combination of food in real life?

fat of a pizza, and it tastes a lot better.'

So what prompts a man who owns a successful multinational company (Pret has expanded rapidly overseas ever since McDonald's took a 30 per cent stake in 2000) to put so much time and energy into a private passion? 'Canary Wharf has brought out a whole new aspect of the creative side in me that had been dormant,' he says.

'Also, in the past 100 years the concept of the restaurant hasn't really changed. Where can you get food that tastes delicious and is so healthy?'

So is there a personal aspect to this crusade? 'The whole idea of delivering quality and value efficiently is quite mesmerising, I suppose,' he says. But how much do his own needs come into creating Itsu? 'It's an age thing as well,' he says. 'As you get older, you have to be much more careful about the fat you put into your body. Either you change your lifestyle completely, or you do something much less difficult - like going to eat at Itsu.'

He says that Itsu is the only place his health-conscious wife eats out, 'and that's nothing to do with her connection with it. There is a need for Itsu.'

*Itsu will open in the autumn on the Second Floor, Cabot Place East*