

FREE WITH THE EVENING STANDARD

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LUCKY WALLET**
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MR PRET A MANGER

What Julian Metcalfe wants you to eat next

When he started his chain of Pret A Manger sandwich bars, back in the Eighties, Julian Metcalfe revolutionised the capital's lunch hour. Now he looks set to do the same for the London restaurant. **Luke Jennings** meets a man who is committed to giving his customers a good deal

and for my next trick

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA LINDER

Here's the thing: it's Monday evening, you're in London, and you want something to eat. You're not quite sure what that something is, but you have a very precise idea of what you don't want. You don't want to go home to some mournful supermarket heat-up in front of Brookside; you don't want to face the fag-smoke and salt'n'vinegar ambience of a pub; you don't want to choke down another greasburger and fries to the strains of 'Hotel California'; and you definitely don't want to pay 50 quid a head for the full three-course, linen tablecloth and ironic waiter treatment. What you want is to walk into some bustling metropolitan watering-hole, to help yourself to something good, and to get on with your Monday evening. And if the ten minutes you originally planned turn into two hours, you want that to be all right too, and not to

a hundred dishes, of which about 30 are in play at any one time. You help yourself to as many or as few of them as you like. After your meal you vanish into the night or you settle in for the long haul with your friends or your significant other. Either way, given the savings made by the no-waiter system – the revolver, Metcalfe estimates, does the work of 16 people – the bill per head shouldn't exceed £17 or £18 in total.

The new venture is located at the junction of Draycott Avenue and Walton Street, on the site formerly occupied by Walton's, a restaurant of impossible grandeur and expensiveness whose demise was comparable in its cultural effect to that of the Austro-Hungarian empire. There is a mild irony in the fact that an establishment famous for its waiting list (you had to book months ahead) should have ceded position to

some customers have difficulty pronouncing the single syllable, and is a typical Metcalfe modification. The entrepreneur has not given an interview for several years – he couldn't see the point – and so my visit is something of a departure for him. He submits to the attentions of the *ES* photographer with good grace, but it is clear that the process unsettles him. 'Some people carry it off very well,' he says. 'But I hate it!' He is particularly appalled at the idea of being photographed when there are customers around who might be distracted or inconvenienced. 'Can't be done,' he says firmly.

He comes to life on the subject of waiters. 'Daphne's next door,' he says incredulously, 'has 78 employees. Can you imagine what they have to pay them?' Of course, it is the customer, he explains, who really has to pay those 78 people, and their meal-tickets reflect this. Lose the waiters, as he has done with his revolver system, and you put the customer in charge. 'T'su now serves 2,000 people a week,' he tells me, 'and the average ticket is £12 per head for lunch and £36 for two in the evening including wine. And that's the final bill, not the bill before all those service charges.' Metcalfe's refusal to take reservations is the result of the same 'power to the people' calculation. 'Especially now,' he says, 'with this system where you have to book with a credit card, and get allocated some time slot – it's horrific.' He himself is a spur-of-the-moment man. He hardly ever makes appointments, does not own a diary and has very little idea what he is going to be doing from day to day, or even from hour to hour. Booking for anything is anathema to him.

Throughout his 15 years in London, Metcalfe continues, he has always looked for some alternative to the restaurant system. 'You so rarely walk away feeling you've had a good time,' he rails. 'Why do we have to pay so much for such a bad deal?' His beef is not with the top-class West End eateries, which he greatly admires, but with the ubiquitous and mediocre middle order. 'Last week,' he says, 'a friend and I wanted something to eat and went into this place which I won't name. We were hungry and we wanted to talk. Well, the food was horrible, the waiter was in a bad mood, and the bill came to just over £100.' He shakes his head. 'How can that be justified?' There are times, Metcalfe continues, when a really grand restaurant experience is what you want, but there are others when all you want is to eat well and go.

The same unfussy, value-for-money imperative impelled Pret A Manger. That particular story started

in 1986, when he and a partner called Sinclair Beecham borrowed £17,000 from the bank and set up a sandwich shop in Victoria. It failed, but the partners pressed on. What they wanted to do was to create benign fast food. These were the days, it must be remembered, when the average Mayfair sandwich – never mind the high-street option – was a hellish amalgam of warm marmite, processed ham, and sweating Kraft slices. Pret A Manger, by contrast, offered cool doorsteps of avocado and mozzarella, hot cheese and bacon croissants, and crunchy BLTs and Super-Clubs. If you were having a hard day you could pull things together with a good, fast Pret A Manger lunch, or you could sit down and take things more slowly. Metcalfe and Beecham expanded, won an Egon Ronay star and the crown of the British Sandwich Association, and now have 80 outlets.

Metcalfe is still very close to Pret – he worries that if I write that he's been concentrating on Itsu, the Pret people will get the impression that the flame of his consideration for them is cooling, which, he insists, is not the case. But he is, he admits, pretty wrapped up in Itsu. He has bought a house just around the corner so that he can hurry round at any time. His current preoccupation is plates. 'Up to now,' he says, 'we've used melamine.' He grabs a small melamine plate: 'But you can never get them quite clean. At least, you can't – he holds it up to the light – but they never look completely clean. I know it's just me being anal, and

'There are times when all you want is to eat well and go'

have some aproned prima donna staring at his nails and willing you – if not actually asking you out loud – to pay up and push off.

Is this possible? Is there a chic, modern, low-priced alternative to the traditional London restaurant experience? Is there any way of dispensing with that dreary 15-minute bread-and-mineral-water hiatus at the beginning of the meal and that questionable rack of service charges at the end of it? Julian Metcalfe, 39-year-old proprietor of the Pret A Manger chain of sandwich shops, feels very strongly that there is, and he's spent the last two years of his life and more than a million pounds of his own money refining an alternative concept. What Metcalfe and his team have finally arrived at is a curious and stylish hybrid called Itsu – a part sushi-bar, part Viper Lounge, part Blade Runner-style food station.

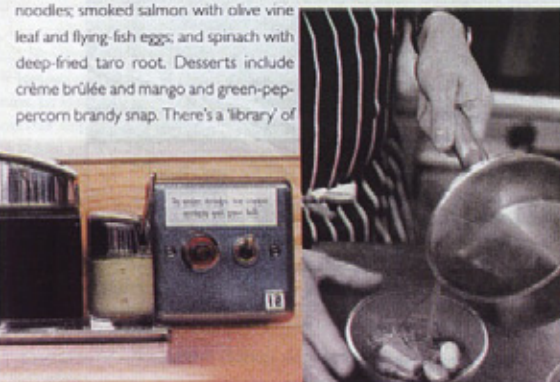
Itsu works as follows: you turn up alone or with a crowd and take your place at the central counter or at a side table. From here you help yourself to plates of food which are circulating on a miniature conveyor belt called a 'revolver', and to a bottle or two from the self-service ice bar. The revolver idea is not new to London – Yo Sushi, among others, operates a similar system – but it is the first time it has been applied to a mixed-style, rather than a specifically Japanese, restaurant. The dishes on Metcalfe's revolver – world food, you might call it, although the influence is predominantly eastern – include avocado crab with glass noodles; smoked salmon with olive vine leaf and flying-fish eggs; and spinach with deep-fried taro root. Desserts include crème brûlée and mango and green-peppercorn brandy snap. There's a 'library' of


one which recoils in horror at the idea of a dress code, claims to be able to deal with a simultaneous influx of a hundred customers, and refuses all reservations on principle.

At first sight you would not identify Julian Metcalfe as the Messianic type. His courteous manner and conservatively cut suit – he is an old Harrovian – suggest a man to whom conformity and the continuance of tradition are all-important. The moment he begins to talk, however, you realise that he is not like this at all. He is that most disconcerting of creatures, the passionate, ruthlessly driven entrepreneur. To his chosen area of endeavour – the provision of fast and medium-paced food to the urban middle-classes – he applies a wholly ideological intensity. 'I care desperately about my customers,' he says. 'We must get everything right for them. I took this thing on two years ago, and I've got to finish it.' At Pret A Manger he has had his name and telephone number printed on the take-away bags so that customers can ring him at any time. A lot of them try it out of sheer curiosity, and are amazed to find themselves talking to the business's founder in person.

My own meeting with Metcalfe takes place in Itsu. In fact, the establishment – Metcalfe feels the word 'restaurant' is not appropriate – is not yet called Itsu; the name outside, and under which the place has been trading for the past 18 months, is T'su. The name-change follows research which reveals that

No waiting (far left) press a switch to order drinks, ice-creams or the bill, otherwise just help yourself to as many of the different dishes passing before your eyes as you want





stylish hybrid,
Viper Lounge,
-style food station

Man with a mission: Metcalfe is passionately committed to his endeavour – the provision of fast and medium-paced food to urban man and woman