

# Leon Rothera

From a hippie upbringing in the north-east to the star-studded film and TV sets of East London and beyond, meet the Shoreditch-based chef on a mission to bring good food back to basics

“I used to take a candle up to bed with me!” says Leon Rothera of his childhood in a remote cottage on a hill. “We lived off the land until I was seven, growing most of our own food. We had chickens, goats and my dad kept bees, too.”

Leon is describing the eco-aspirational life some of us dream of living today. But this was the 1980s, before being self-sufficient earned you Instagram likes or conversation starters at dinner parties. Born to bohemian parents in Newcastle upon Tyne, Leon was one of the first children in the North East to be officially home-schooled.

“For a while I just wanted to be called something regular like Adam, go to school and be normal. But now I really embrace my name and roots,” says Leon.

And it turns out his roots run deep, with a family tree grown out of freedom, food and creativity. Named after his French great-grandfather, Leon has also inherited his rebellious entrepreneurial spirit.

“He owned a bakery in the Massif Central region of France, which my dad still has to this day. During World War II, my great-grandfather was a bread dealer, selling his famous loaves on the black market. He was one of the only bakers dealing bread at a time when people didn’t have access to lovely loaves, due to rationing. He did really well, but still drove a taxi as his side hustle.”

So was it written in the stars that Leon was going to

work in the world of food himself?

“I grew up surrounded by delicious home-cooked food — my mum was a big baker and there was always a batch of jam tarts, scones, sausage rolls or my mum’s speciality, Bakewell tarts on the go. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to do that as my job. I was always baking cakes and making omelettes, to varying degrees of success!”

After college, Leon went on to work alongside Michelin-starred chefs, Herbert Berger at No.1 Lombard Street and Paul Gayler at The Lanesborough, refining his talent — although he says his culinary skills are mostly self-taught. “The way I cook today is the result of lots of trial and error, such as my pastry which I now make by eye.”

Leon moved away from the high-octane, highly-regimented restaurant world and, channelling his great-grandfather, set up on his own — first catering for dinner parties with Joudie Kalla (author of *Palastine on a Plate*).

“After three years, in 2005 I opened up a deli/café called Honest Foods in Brixton, serving independently sourced produce from around the UK — it was a celebration of the best of British food, done simply and well.” However, Leon realised that bringing in a few hundred pounds a day wasn’t going to cut it. Then came a moment of serendipity — when he was locking up for one last time, ready to hand over the keys and

**‘IT’S ABOUT COOKING WITH INTEGRITY AND COOKING FOOD I’D WANT TO EAT MYSELF, MADE FROM SCRATCH’**

WORDS: EMMA WINTERSCHLADEN





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178-180 Victoria Park Road, E9 7HD  
[myneighboursthedumplings.com](http://myneighboursthedumplings.com)

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1 Vyner Street, E2 9DG  
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94-96 Commercial Street, E1 6LZ  
[stjohnrestaurant.com](http://stjohnrestaurant.com)

rent out his café space, he received a call asking if he wanted to cater for the indie film *Kick Off*.

"I'd catered for a PlayStation commercial before, but to be offered a film was a game-changer." So for the next two years, Leon worked out of his kitchen in Bow, before setting up officially in Shoreditch. Today, he caters for the likes of *Black Mirror*, *James Bond* films, *Mission Impossible* and most recently, his biggest job yet, Netflix's new series *Bridgerton*.

And does Leon miss running his café? "I love the freedom I have now, because it's different – rather than appealing to one type of self-selecting customer, you have to please everyone on a set, from the riggers and sparkies, to the vegan gluten-free artists and sometimes fussy actors."

One actor who isn't fussy, though, and is a fan of Leon is Olivia Colman. "She requested us for *Broadchurch*, after we worked as support catering on *The Crown*, which was a great feeling." And as for creating food that appeals to all, Leon's cooking style is what he calls "honest food".

"It's about cooking with integrity and cooking food I'd want to eat myself, made from scratch — I'm all about a brilliant, homemade stock as a base."

Talk turns to East London, where Leon's prep kitchen and office is based.



"It's been exciting to experience the food scene and see it change over the last 10 years. There's been a move away from high-brow fine dining, to a more braun-style, nose-to-tail style of restaurant. There's a reason why the likes of St John's Bread and Wine in Spitalfields and Lyle's in Shoreditch are soaring." Bone marrow on toast. Smoked mackerel with horseradish. It's this sort of comforting food, showcasing artisan, good-quality produce that Leon is happy to see more of.

That eating out should be, first and foremost, a pleasure to be enjoyed rather than a show to be impressed by, is one reason he set up *@dad\_elise\_and\_food* with his daughter Elise.

"We review restaurants we go to together. She's now 13 and at the age where she's a bit cool for me, but it's still a great way for us to spend time together." It's a way too for Leon to share his passion and pass on his knowledge of food. "We didn't ever eat out when I was little, so it's nice to introduce Elise to the varied and colourful cuisines on offer in London. I always think a child's palette should be better than their parents'."

The kind of food Leon eats and cooks is the kind of food we all increasingly want to eat and cook. Hearty, humble and predominantly from the land.

"Today my food has come full circle and reflects that of my childhood," he says. "There's a focus on provenance and ingredients, with vegetables at centre stage."

With that, Leon lifts his arm to show an intricate artichoke, etched into his skin: "Dad used to grow the best artichokes. It's a reminder of where I'm from and who I am."

Follow Leon on Instagram *@Leonrothera*

## #EastLondonFoodHeroes



### Alice Williams

After some time in Thailand working for an organisation that cares for women who have left the sex industry, Alice recognised that women were facing similar issues on her doorstep in East London. In 2013, after a £16,000 crowdfunding campaign, Luminary Bakery was born.

As well as serving delicious bakes to sweet-toothed punters, this social enterprise's chief purpose is to empower women who have been victims of violence, (such as sex trafficking), have been in the prison system or been homeless, and giving them an opportunity to get their lives back on track via a route into employment. And it's working a treat — 70% of women enrolled in the programme reach employment within 24 months of graduation and many have since started baking businesses of their own.

*@luminarybakery, luminarybakery.com*

### Bettina Campolucci Bordi

Denmark-born, London-living Bettina has long been a champion of the plant-based, seasonal way of life and, most importantly, how we can make it accessible to everyone. With two books to her name, her most recent *The 7 Day Vegan Challenge*, fully encompasses Bettina's joyful, fuss-free approach to food. Alongside hosting mindful retreats throughout the year to far-flung locations, she also runs workshops in and around East London, focusing on low-waste, roots-to-shoots cooking. Her new podcast, *What the Focaccia*, has just launched with Niki Webster of Rebel Recipes, and includes juicy conversations with fellow foodies on how to be sustainable as a food business in the modern day. Look out too for her new YouTube channel series — a behind-the-scenes look at farms and factories, and how we can build a more planet-friendly food future.

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