

# The King of vegan London

This city's eat-green scene owes a hell of a debt to one man.

*Tristan Parker* meets Bounsou 'King' Senathit, the passionate chef behind CookDaily.

Portrait *Andy Parsons*



**'The next thing we knew, kids who didn't even like vegetables were queuing outside the door'**

**IT'S 11.45AM ON** a dreary Tuesday and the shipping-container units at Boxpark Shoreditch haven't quite woken up yet – except for one. The doors of CookDaily won't open until noon, but there's already a queue outside. Inside, the dimly lit, semi-industrial space feels like an intimate club or a late-night bar. 'No blood, no bones' proclaims a sign on the wall, reminding customers of what won't be dished up here.

This defiantly alternative eatery is the work of Bounsou 'King' Senathit, a charismatic, outspoken and passionate vegan chef who is unapologetic about his commitment to the cause. 'Turning more people vegan, that's my goal in life,' he explains, as we sit together before service starts.

On the walls of CookDaily is the menu: large boards picturing and detailing 17 dishes in spiky letters. Each colourful bowl references a different cooking style, world cuisine or culture, such as the popular weed-themed High Grade, with hemp seed crumble and optional vegan 'chicken', or the fiery Hard Bowl, with yam, dumplings and ackee.

It's a world away from the idea that vegan dishes are bland, nutritionally lacking or only ordered by wellness bloggers. CookDaily will shortly be serving bowl after vegan bowl to besuited office workers, laptop-wielding creatives and savvy tourists, many of whom are as keen to Instagram their food as they are to eat it.

Since launching in Shoreditch in 2015 (a second branch opened in Boxpark Croydon in 2016), CookDaily has acquired legions of loyal followers and a cult-like cool within certain

circles, thanks to that bold, beautiful food and King's flat refusal to compromise. 'When I first did the "No blood, no bones" sign, friends said to me "King, isn't that a bit much? People are going to be scared to come in." I said "It is what it is." I'm not going to tone down my opinions.'

He hasn't, and it certainly hasn't harmed business. Several people approach King after finishing their meal, thanking him, praising the food and shaking his hand.

It hasn't always been this way. Before turning vegetarian in 2009 and vegan in 2014, east London lad King (raised in East Ham) worked as a chef in various meaty, Michelin-starred kitchens, training under top chefs. 'That experience helped me grow, it made me tough,' he says, although he admits that he wasn't happy in that environment. 'It changed me as a person, it made me into a kind of monster,' he says. 'I had to take a step back, so I turned to Buddhism and meditation, I started a family and got married. I had a clearer vision of Buddhist ethics and that's when I cut out meat. No harming. At end of the day, CookDaily is vegan for the animals. Seeing cruelty to animals broke my heart.'

When CookDaily opened, vegan eateries in London were few and far between. Cut to 2018 and the culinary picture is very different. London has fallen for veganism in a big way, and King isn't shy in talking about his role in this change. 'The reason why we have all these other vegan places is because of me – I have to voice that. I kicked down the doors in 2015 when we opened. The vegan





scene wouldn't be what it is without CookDaily. I've created my own lane and I'm staying here.'

Since day one, he's been joined in that lane by prominent figures from UK grime. Skepta, Tempa T and JME all came down during the first week, tweeting their support. 'The next thing we knew, kids who didn't even like vegetables were queuing outside the door!' recalls King. He says that committed fan (and vegan) JME is still a regular.

Before CookDaily, he and King would hang out, talking veganism and eating. 'I gave him his first homemade almond milk and he was blown away,' says King. 'He got the same juicer as me and we started juicing together on this healthy journey. We'd go to Wagamama and Nando's, creating our own vegan menu from side dishes. I said to him: "You wait until I open my own place, it's gonna go off." When I opened, he brought everyone down and that was the new space to be. He's like the ambassador of CookDaily now! He comes here five times a week and gets takeaway for his family.'

It's not just grime stars who love King's veg. Emeli Sandé and Professor Green are advocates, and Childish Gambino's been spotted here. 'It definitely helps,' he admits, 'but I must get one thing straight: I never went to anyone. I was just doing my thing and they supported - that's love and it means a lot to me. But it wasn't a gameplan.'

What King does have a plan for, though, is his legacy. 'I want to leave a vegan eating culture in London and I've started it already. You know how Wiley's the godfather of grime? I want to be known as the godfather of vegan food in London.'

Seems like you don't need blood or bones to change a city's eating habits. Just belief. ■  
 → CookDaily Boxpark Shoreditch, 2-10 Bethnal Green Rd. Shoreditch High St Overground. CookDaily Boxpark Croydon, 99 George St. East Croydon rail. Both open noon-9.30pm.



Shoreditch the meat CookDaily at Boxpark (top) and two of King's globally inspired bowls

### THREE MORE Game-changing vegan spots, as picked by King



#### Itadaki Zen

Launched as Europe's first vegan and organic Japanese restaurant, this gem is as authentic as they come. Choose from sushi, tempura, udon and more, or try a set-menu spread.  
 → 139 King's Cross Rd.  
 ☉ King's Cross.



#### Piadina Genuina

Tagliatelle and ravioli are made on site at this little Italian. Don't skip the piadina: flatbreads made without the traditional lard and filled with vegan kebab meat, Sunday roasts and more.  
 → 251 Wick Rd.  
 Hackney Wick Overground.



#### Temple of Hackney

This lot nearly broke the internet when they started serving fried 'chicken' (made from seitan, a type of wheat gluten), confirming that vegans love devouring junk food as much as everyone else.  
 → 10 Morning Lane.  
 Hackney Central Overground.

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