

MAX  
ROCHIA  
THE  
FUTURE  
OF  
BRITISH  
FOOD



Photography by Jacob Lillis  
Words by Kyle Beechey



# W

hen stepping foot inside Café Cecilia, it doesn't instantly feel like London, or especially like being in Hackney on Regent's Canal where it's located. The restaurant feels like it could be in Copenhagen or even Milan. It's slick, yet airy, has edge, but is welcoming to all, even children and dogs and it's chic, but not trying too hard to be. It speaks to the vision of its chef-owner, Max Rocha, who after cutting his teeth at iconic restaurants like Spring, St. John and The River Cafe, opened his own place in 2021, that now five years in, has become one of London's new institutions.

Rocha started his career in music. He worked at a label and found the work thankless to the point where he started to fall out of love with music. He eventually was let go which was a blessing in disguise because it led him to finding work in a kitchen, first starting at Skye Gynell's seasonal produce-driven Spring in Somerset House. *"I didn't grow up as a foodie. People always ask me "Were you always into food?" and the truth is I wasn't. I needed a job and I found one in a kitchen."*, explains Rocha. The work resonated with him. He enjoyed the straightforwardness of it all, clock-in, clock-out and working as part of a team where every role was integral, everyone in a kitchen has a specific purpose. *"If I called out sick one day, the whole team would suffer because my portion of the food wouldn't be there. I needed to be there, we all did. It wasn't like working in an office at all"*, says Rocha.



After working at Spring he found his way to St. John, where the food and approach to cooking were different. At Spring it was all about the vegetables; using seasonal ingredients with reverence, relationships with farmers and taking extra care in every step of the cooking process. Whereas at St. John he quickly learned it was about the bottom line and nose to tail in a literal sense with everything that came into the kitchen. *“There was no waste, none at all. We also had different grades of produce, if we were making a sausage stuffed onion, we’d use a different onion than we’d use for stock or a dish where it wasn’t the most prominent ingredient.”* says Rocha. He carried this principle through with him at Café Cecilia. There are fine Italian onions in the kitchen for salads, as well as more standard issue ones for braises and stews. The business of running a restaurant was what really hit home for him from his time at St. John. In an industry with tight margins, every morsel of food counts and that’s why you’ll see an ingredient multiple ways as the week goes by. *“On a Wednesday, the pork dish will be leg, but later in the week it will transition to chops because there are only two legs. We have to get creative and use every part, not just the fancy bits.”* he explains.

After St. John he found himself at Ruth Rogers’ The River Cafe, where there was a whole other set of rules. The mentality was always to use the best, no expense spared. The focus was on making food taste like the most delicious version of itself. It led to always using *“the best”* whether it was olive oil, produce or meat in every dish, in every form. There was no use for any ingredient that wasn’t premium, but Rocha saw that reflected in the price of dinner where it can cost upwards of a £100 per person. He knew The River Cafe was reserved for special occasions and for the elite. What Rocha took away from his experience there was technique and the consideration of little details like, sourcing, painstakingly perfect cookery of everything and fine tuned prep work.

Rocha didn’t ever intend to open a restaurant, but he found himself mid-pandemic where he was furloughed from The River Cafe with a lot of time on his hands. He started to make picnic baskets for people to enjoy outdoors in the social distancing era and they caught on like wildfire.



"They went viral and I sold hundreds. There were people waiting outside of my flat for them. I thought maybe now is the time? Why not open my own place?" says Rocha. He sought advice from his father, John Rocha, an award-winning fashion designer and entrepreneur, who encouraged him and they went into business together. To this day, Rocha senior still handles all of Café Cecilia's business affairs. It's very much a family operation as Rocha's sister Simone, of her eponymous fashion brand, designs the uniforms. His mother, Odette, consults on the menu and is an official taste tester of new dishes providing true, honest and occasionally harsh criticism. "She comes in all the time to eat and she tells me if something's gone wrong with service. I can feel the honest feedback, which isn't always easy, but it's really cool.", says Rocha.

Design is ingrained into the Rocha fabric and Max and his father came together to model Café Cecilia after their family home; dark wood, white walls, open concept, big windows and lots of natural light. Simple, but anything but boring. There are always fresh seasonal florals at the entryway, like brilliant yellow mimosas in winter or cherry blossoms in spring. It's a chic and sophisticated space that complements the modern British food coming out of the kitchen. The menu changes frequently, but there's always toothsome wholemeal Guinness bread, delicate anchovy fritti and an oniglet that comes just the right amount of bleeding red with rich peppercorn sauce and crispy chips. Many will tell you, it's easily the best steak in town. The food manages to be that balance of familiar, but with a hint of newness and surprise to have it linger in your mind days after your meal. It's refined, reconsidered comfort food. Not highfalutin, intellectual, over-conceptualized, but delicious food that you want to eat.

Now that the cafe has been open five years Rocha has started to expand his horizons. He published his first cookbook in the fall of 2025 at Phaidon filled with recipes like the iconic Guinness bread as well as more seasonal dishes like asparagus with romesco and crème fraiche and a chicory, blood orange and stilton salad. He's also launched breakfast on weekends starting at 9am that has become a big draw for families with young children and folks who live in the neighborhood. To encourage accessibility for guests of all budgets, he's also launched a

weekday set-lunch program where for £30 guests get three courses of appetizer, entree and dessert. It's important to Rocha to create a place where everyone feels welcome. "No matter who you are when you come in, and whatever you order, I want everyone to have the same experience no matter how much money they are spending. We had a table recently who split a set lunch. I liked that. If they have a great time, maybe they'll come back to celebrate a birthday or maybe they won't, but they tend to. Recently we had someone's wedding, they liked the restaurant so much that they wanted to get married here and that's amazing", says Rocha.

When Rocha is off-duty, which happens every Monday and Tuesday, when the restaurant is closed, he's managed to find balance. A few years ago he became sober, eschewing all drugs and alcohol, and is now a running enthusiast, logging miles six times a week. His diet at home tends to be more focused towards fueling than for hedonistic pleasure. "It's mostly quinoa with pesto, smoked salmon or chicken, rice and broccoli, very simple and my girlfriend does most of it.", says Rocha. He makes time to try restaurants around town, often meeting friends for lunch on days off at places as varied as the multi-location Bao, Soho's Mountain or Mayfair's LPM. An eclectic mix that keeps him on the pulse of what's going on around London.

To those looking in, Rocha could be said to be one of the major players in developing the future of British food. When asked as to where he thinks it's going, it's towards refinement. "People that came up in the kitchens of St. John, Rochelle Canteen and River Cafe, like me, are opening their own places. We're using more intricate techniques, pushing the presentation and the skill level further. The diversity of London is bringing it to many cuisines too." Other chefs that are part of this refined British new guard that he admires are Sebastian Francis Myers at Planque, Nick Bramham at Quality Wines and Anna Tobias at Cafe Deco. As different as their restaurants might be, there's a common thread in their techniques and flavors. They tend to borrow from Italy, Spain or France, but with an eye to austerity, precision and measure in the plates that come out of the kitchen. Nothing extraneous, just simple, refined and confident food. It's clear that there's much more to the cuisine than a solid fry-up or a plate of bangers and mash. We're curious to see what directions this refinement continues to take us.

