

Vegetarian food is about creativity and working with the seasons, says celebrity chef and author Aldo Zilli, who will be taking his restaurant outside on 1 October to mark the day.

INTERVIEW: MARY HOGARTH

# ALDO ZILLI

He came to the UK aged 19, with little more than a passion for food. Now Aldo Zilli has a string of restaurants, has written several books and made numerous TV appearances, including most recently on BBC2's popular *Ready Steady Cook*.

While his passion for good food has never wavered, his consumption has changed dramatically following a stint on ITV's *Celebrity Fit Club*, which Aldo admits changed his life and eating habits for ever. It was this quest for healthy eating that led to his latest venture, Zilli Green, a vegetarian restaurant which is also eco-friendly – from the lights down to the napkins.

Aldo currently lives in London with his wife Nikki and their two children, Rocco, four, and Twiggi, two. He is currently working on his next book, aptly titled *Zilli Green*, and preparing to stage an event to mark World Vegetarian Day.

### Why is food so important to you?

I come from a large family, so when I was growing up in Pescara, Italy, food was at a premium. At about 12, I started cooking with my mother, to help out. She worked as a chef in a local hotel, so I often went with her to the market to buy food. I learned that seasonal ingredients are part of the process.

There were no supermarkets or shops. All the produce in the market was grown locally. It was a very organic process. As a young boy I didn't like potatoes until my mother showed me how to make gnocchi, which was one of the first things I ever made – it's still one of my favourite foods. My second favourite is, of course, pasta and sauce.

### How did you get into vegetarian cooking?

I had to stop eating red meat because of heart disease – which runs in the family – and high cholesterol levels. This meant I had to drastically change my lifestyle – giving up meat, alcohol and smoking. As a result, my taste buds are now much stronger. Chefs who smoke normally compensate by adding lots of salt to food, because their taste buds are dulled.

### Tell me about *Celebrity Fit Club*...

That was a very strange period in my life.



Aldo's new venture, Zilli Green, is an eco-friendly vegetarian restaurant

I decided it was time for me to change my way of behaving with food and learned about nutrition, which as a chef I should have known about, but didn't. I was eating at the wrong times and was 3 stone overweight. I went for a change of lifestyle as opposed to dieting. My new book, *Zilli Light*, reflects all of that – how to eat small amounts and fresh food all the time. People travel and go to work, but there's only one of you, so you have to look after your body, no matter what your routine.

### How did Zilli Green evolve?

A friend who used to work for me became a vegan chef and went travelling. After my change of lifestyle, we started working together again and he showed me more versatile ways of cooking vegetarian food. I decided maybe it's time for Zilli's to add a vegetarian restaurant to the brand and so Zilli Green was born.

### What's Zilli Green's most popular dish?

Definitely our lentil soya burgers.

### What's the most important aspect to vegetarian cooking?

Don't overdo the cheese. A lot of vegetarian dishes tend to use cheese to add flavour. I use a lot of herbs and always have fresh ingredients. Things like wild mushrooms,

when in season, can be frozen, as can peas and broad beans.

Some chefs don't like to cook vegetarian dishes, as you have to be a bit more creative. It's not as easy as just grilling a steak. At Zilli Green we make different curries, use courgette flowers when in season and tempura, as well as vegetables and fruit. We have to be very careful we don't go out of season. You have to really think in advance, so you prepare your menu in season.



Aldo with Leona Lewis; he provided some of the veggie catering for her Labyrinth tour

PHOTO: Dominic Lipinski/PA Wire

# My World Vegetarian Day



## Do men and women have different eating habits?

Yes, I see that with my wife Nikki, who is now a vegetarian too, although she has never eaten much meat and doesn't like fish. Between men and women there is a huge difference. I think this is because men are natural carnivores and look less at their diet – men are more into beer, wine and three- or four-course meals.

But I don't think there should be a difference between men and women. When I was growing up [Aldo is the youngest of nine children] everybody ate the same food. Mealtimes were quite strict, food was served at a certain time and you had to sit down to eat – if you didn't, it was assumed you weren't hungry. I think these strict rules worked, we were more together as a family and always had something to say at the table.

With my own family I have made it a rule that we all eat dinner together. Even if I'm working I always go home and have dinner with my family, then go back to work. Eating with my children is very important.

## Who is your favourite celebrity dinner guest at Zilli Green?

Leona Lewis. I thought she was going to be such a diva, but she's lovely and very down to earth. She's a very strict vegetarian and only ate stir-fries. It was not a balanced diet, so I introduced her to quinoa, barley spelt and lentils.

## What are you planning for World Vegetarian Day?

We are going to take Zilli Green outside, cooking under a canopy to let people sample our creations outdoors.

World Vegetarian Day is incredibly important and is starting to get the message across, but more needs to be done to tell people why they shouldn't eat too much meat and why being a vegetarian is good. Even if you get two or three people a week to eat less meat, it's a start.

## What can busy health-conscious parents cook if they only have 10 minutes?

The thing about children is that they don't want to wait for food, so keeping fresh ingredients in the fridge is a must. When shopping, always think vegetables – broccoli, spinach, garlic and tomatoes are staples. Children will eat a fresh, quick tomato sauce with pasta, or a risotto.

It's very strange how people don't really think about what they are feeding children, but kids like to taste food. My son Rocco is a very fussy eater, but loves pasta, while Twiggi eats anything. But it's always important to pay attention to the one who's not a good eater, as children set eating patterns very early and we are what we eat.

## Where would you like to be in 2020?

I would like to see a Zilli Green in every city in Britain. And for me? Being on a farm in Italy growing vegetables, fruit and doing nothing.



## Grilled watermelon, walnut, pineapple and broad bean salad

Serves 4 • Prep 10 mins • Cook 2 mins

½ watermelon, deseeded and cut into large dices  
 2 slices pineapple, cut into large dices  
 300g broad beans, blanched and podded  
 80g shelled walnuts  
 1 bunch of fresh mint, washed and roughly chopped  
 300g baby spinach, washed  
 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
 2 red endives, leaves removed and washed  
 1 escarole, washed and ripped

1 Char-grill the watermelon and pineapple on a griddle pan or barbecue for 1 minute each side.  
 2 Remove from the grill pan and toss with all the remaining ingredients. Serve the tossed watermelon salad in the middle of the plate.  
 ■ PER SERVING 322 cals, fat 21g, sat fat 2g, protein 12.5g, carbs 22g, sugars 14g, fibre 8g, salt 0.4g

## Goat's cheese salad with rocket, baked plum tomatoes and sautéed pears

Serves 4 • Prep 10 mins • Cook 20 mins

4 plum tomatoes	1 tsp white sugar
4 tbsp olive oil	50g butter
8 slices of vegetarian goat's cheese	120g rocket
4 pears, peeled and sliced	1 tbsp good balsamic vinegar

1 Preheat the grill. Slice the tomatoes in half and place on a tray, drizzle with 1 tbsp of the olive oil and grill for 10 minutes until soft but still firm. Place a slice of goat's cheese on each tomato half, and set aside.

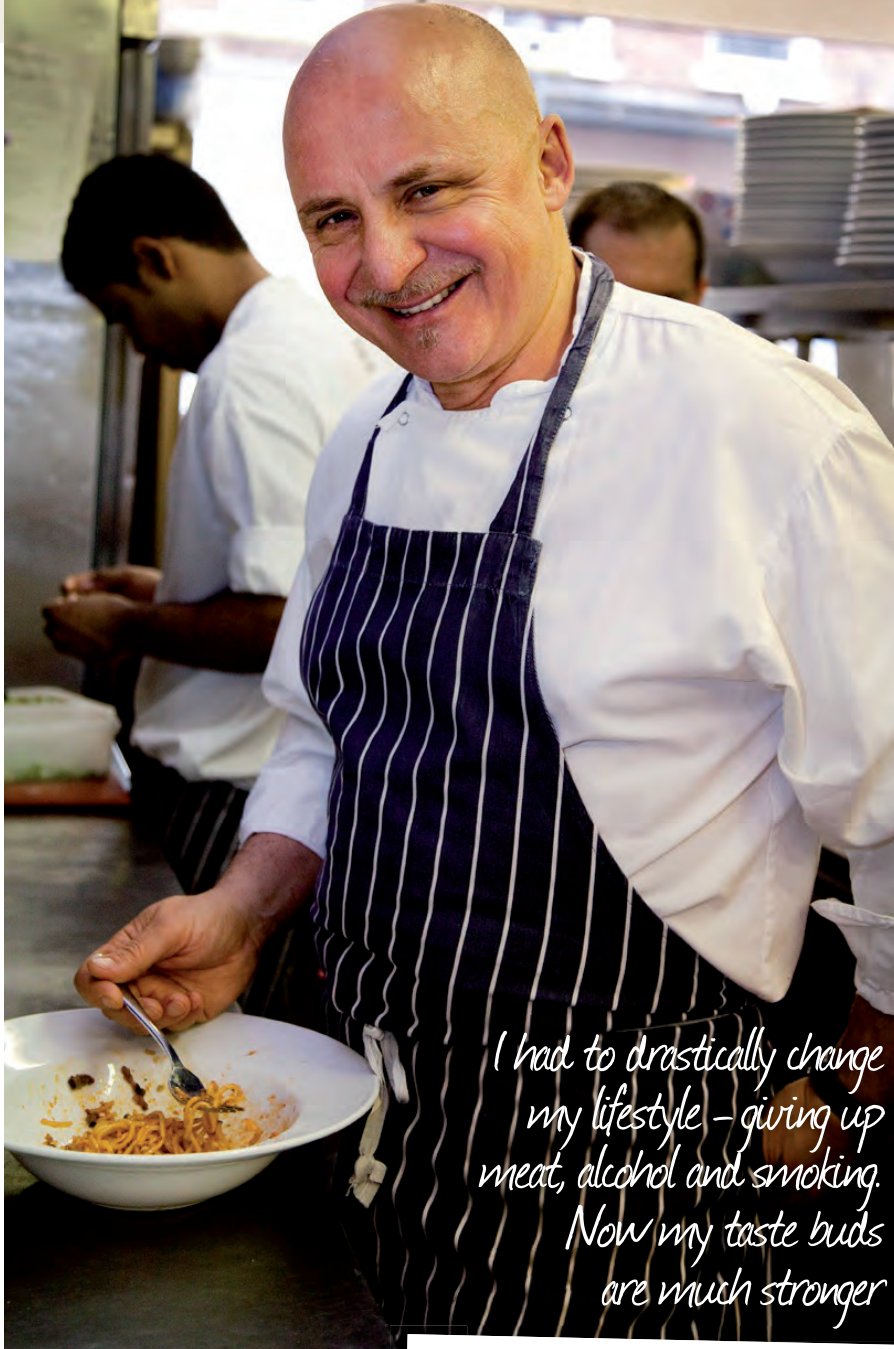
2 Sprinkle the pears with the sugar and pan-fry in the butter until soft (add more butter if you need to).

3 Place the tomato and goat's cheese under the grill and cook until the top of the goat's cheese is a light golden colour.

4 Serve the tomato and goat's cheese on top of the rocket with the sautéed pear on the side. Drizzle with the remaining olive oil and balsamic vinegar and season to taste.

■ PER SERVING 376 cals, fat 30g, sat fat 15g, protein 9g, carbs 16g, sugars 16g, fibre 3g, salt 2.5g





*I had to drastically change my lifestyle – giving up meat, alcohol and smoking. Now my taste buds are much stronger*

## Butternut squash and spinach

Serves 4 • Prep 10 mins • Cook 25 mins

- 1 butternut squash
- olive oil
- fresh sage
- 2 handfuls of frozen peas
- 6 sunblushed tomatoes, sliced
- 400g spinach, roughly chopped
- 1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

- 1 Preheat the oven to 190C/fan 170C/gas 5.
  - 2 Peel the squash and cut into cubes. Place on a baking tray and drizzle with a little oil and scatter some fresh sage on top. Bake in the oven for 25 minutes until cooked. Remove and set aside to cool.
  - 3 Blanch the peas in boiling water and drain.
  - 4 In a bowl, mix together the squash, peas, spinach, sunblushed tomatoes and extra virgin olive oil. Season to taste and serve.
- PER SERVING 187 cals, fat 13.5g, sat fat 2g, protein 6g, carbs 10g, sugars 7.5g, fibre 7g, salt 0.9g



## Polenta with mixed mushrooms

Serves 8 • Prep 20 mins • Cook 45 mins

- 1 litre water
- 2 tsp salt
- 175g polenta flour
- 50g butter
- 100g vegetarian Parmesan-style cheese, freshly grated
- 5 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- 6 field mushrooms, brushed clean and sliced
- 175g wild mushrooms (porcini), brushed clean and sliced
- 4 tbsp chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 125ml dry white wine, such as Verdicchio
- 8 fresh basil leaves, chopped, plus extra leaves to garnish

- 1 Put the water in a large deep pan, add the salt and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat and gradually add the polenta flour, stirring constantly with a whisk.
  - 2 Simmer for 20 minutes until the polenta is very dense and separating from the side of the pan – it may seem that it has thickened faster than stated, but it really must cook on to allow the grain to become tender.
  - 3 Beat the butter and Parmesan into the polenta and season to taste, adding plenty of freshly ground black pepper. Pour the wet polenta into a cake tin to form a layer about 2.5cm thick. Spread out the mixture with a palette knife until even. Allow to set and cool.
  - 4 Meanwhile, heat 3 tbsp of the olive oil in a large frying pan. Add the onion and fry for 5 minutes until soft and just starting to brown. Stir in the garlic, mushrooms and parsley and fry for 5-8 minutes until the mushrooms are golden brown. Season.
  - 5 Pour in the wine and simmer for 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and stir in the chopped basil.
  - 6 Cut the polenta into eight wedges and brush the tops with oil. Heat a griddle pan until very hot and place the wedges, oiled-side down on the pan, pressing them down. Cook for 2-3 minutes until golden. Brush the uncooked side with more oil, then gently turn with a palette knife or fish slice. Cook for another 2-3 minutes until toasted.
  - 7 Spoon the mushroom mixture over the polenta wedges and sprinkle with torn basil leaves. Serve immediately.
- PER SERVING 264 cals, fat 16.5g, sat fat 7g, protein 6g, carbs 21g, sugars 1g, fibre 1.5g, salt 2g