

## 16 Food + Drink

# Ciao gluten! The Italian chef who breaks the rules

Chef Antonio Alderuccio tells **Giulia Crouch** how his plant-based, gluten-free pizza is taking on the world

**K**nown for being sticklers for tradition and authenticity, it is at your peril that you mess with an Italian recipe.

So when I heard of the Sicilian-born chef Antonio Alderuccio, who's disrupting the status quo of his homeland with his gluten-free and vegan Italian restaurant in north London, I was curious. Plant Club in Newington Green is the only establishment of its kind in the country and it's attracting attention.

Last year Alderuccio, 34, who moved to the UK eight years ago, was crowned Britain's pasta chef of the year from the Federation of Italian Chefs with a gluten-free and plant-based *paccheri* dish entered into the "regular" category. He suspected, given the circumstances, that his chances of winning the prestigious title were low. "It's considered a second-class food," he says. "There's a lot of snobbery towards gluten-free and vegan." So when he won — the first time in the history of the competition that a dish of this kind has — he cried. "It felt like a huge moment for Italian food," he says.

Now he plans to take on Naples — the birthplace of the *margherita* and home

“One guy started crying in the restaurant. He was so happy to have a beer and pizza

of mozzarella — with his gluten-free, no-cheese offering at the pizza world championships in June. "It's the Olympics of pizza-making," says Alderuccio. "Napoli will be hard to convince."

Alderuccio didn't start out wanting to cook vegan or gluten-free food. It was when he moved to London when he was 26 and met a woman who was coeliac and diabetic that the idea came about. "She was a foodie and dreamt of eating in nice restaurants but there was nowhere for her. No one else wanted to put the effort in, so I took on the challenge. It felt like a necessity. I felt like I was providing a service to people who didn't have it before."

His path wasn't straightforward. Italian cuisine, famous the world over for pizza and pasta, relies heavily on gluten, and recreating its characteristic stretchy quality wasn't easy. It was during the pandemic that he began experimenting with pizza. He bought a pizza oven from a restaurant that was closing down, shut himself in the kitchen and tried for months to develop a dough. One day he flung what he thought was a mistake in the oven and voilà, it worked. "It was a complete accident," he says.

He began selling gluten-free pizzas on



Antonio Alderuccio

Deliveroo and people loved them. "Sales rocketed. We had 300 per cent growth in three months. That's when I knew I was on to something."

Pizzerias started contacting him asking if they could buy the base, but he turned them down. Right now it's not for sale, and his exact recipe is a secret. All he'll reveal is it's a blend of starch and good rice flour.

I'm sceptical — how could gluten-free pizza ever compare with the stretchy, chewy, soft, traditional pizza I love so much? He says many people feel this way.

Then he presents me with one of his signature dishes, the "indulgent garlic bread" with raw macerated datterini tomatoes from Sicily, superstraccia (a vegan version of stracciatella cheese) and oregano. Taking a bite, it was crisp, chewy and yield-

ing in parts; just the kind of pizza you really want to get your teeth into and not stop until it's all gone. I was truly surprised.

"One guy started crying in the restaurant," he remembers. "He was crying because he'd never been able to eat in an Italian restaurant before. He was so happy to have a beer and pizza."

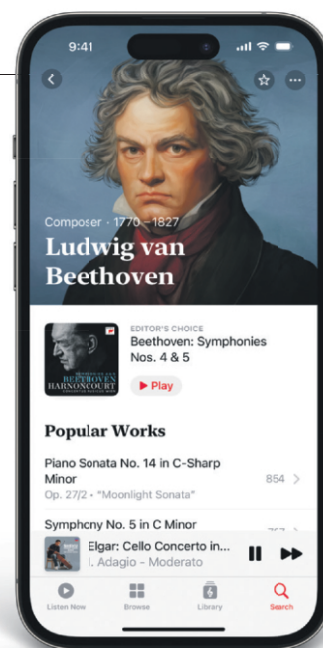
As well as praise from customers, Alderuccio now also has recognition from his fellow chefs. Theo Randall, an acclaimed chef of Italian food and one of the judges of the national pasta competition last year, said Alderuccio's gluten-free dish was "absolutely mind-blowing". "I wasn't even thinking about the fact it was gluten-free."

Now it's just Naples that he needs to convince.

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