FRESHLY MINTED

From mustard to mint, Sir Michael Colman has reintroduced a crop not seen for generations on his Hampshire farm, says **Samantha Whitaker**

Sir Michael Colman is a patient man. He is also indefatigable. After nearly 50 years in the family business, Reckitt & Colman, you might think it was time for a well-earned rest. But instead he embarked on a new mission: to revive a crop not seen in Britain since the Second World War. Although in the early 20th century England was famous for producing the best peppermint in the world, between the two World Wars, when food production took precedence, the crop completely died out. But reintroducing peppermint at Summerdown Farm, Colman's 2,000-acre Hampshire estate, was no easy feat and, in the end, it took more than a decade to get it right.

Colman started at his father's business at 18, young and inexperienced. Fortunately, he worked in a department run entirely by ex-servicemen and had, he says, 'the most marvellous training about how you set about getting things done'. When his father died in 1961 and Colman inherited Summerdown Farm, he was heavily involved in Reckitt & Colman, and very much needed to be able to send his five children to school. 'I knew I couldn't make a lot of money from the farm. I didn't have a farming background and I didn't really know much about it,' he says. At that time, a number of far-sighted farmers in the area decided to join forces to farm higher-value products collectively. They asked Colman, with his business acumen, to become director and together the syndicate successfully farmed 3,000 acres of vining peas on their combined acreage. When the price of peas fell in the mid-1990s, they experimented with peppermint, but it was considered too long term – so Colman decided to go it alone.

Several trips to the west coast of America – where peppermint production relocated after it died out in the UK – formed part of a steep learning curve for Colman's farm manager Ian Margetts, who has worked at Summerdown Farm for more than 30 years. 'There wasn't anyone left here to ask how we do it,' explains Colman, so he sent Margetts to learn from farmers who are now harvesting peppermint on an industrial scale. Colman was after *Mentha piperita*, a clean and creamy strain of peppermint considered far superior to the more bitter *Mentha arvensis*. Most mint-flavoured products are made from a blend of refined arvensis oil and a small amount of the quality piperita oil, resulting in a cheap product with a satisfactory flavour but no distinguishing characteristics.

The turning point for Colman came when he first tried a peppermint sweet from the US made with pure piperita oil. As someone well versed in the consumer product business, for him the sweets had one critical characteristic: they were different. 'You may not like it any better. But to be successful in the consumer product business you don't have to please everybody,' he explains. 'You just need something different.' Then, he says, 'as long as there is a sufficient minority who prefer it, that difference is what they want and they won't want anything else'. ➔





Colman was convinced and, after experimenting with several strains, they settled on Black Mitcham. But it was very difficult to get the crop established. 'It works well in the soil, provided we get the right amount of rain when we want it,' explains Margetts. That's always a challenge – they have no surface water and, although the farm sits on an aquifer, it supplies drinking water to the whole of Basingstoke, so it would be almost impossible to get an abstraction licence for irrigation. The mint likes cold nights, long sunny days and plenty of moisture to produce the oil capsules on the underside of the leaves. It's quite different to garden mint: 'If you added a sprig to your boiled potatoes, for example, the flavour would be overpowering,' says Margetts.

Alongside the crop, Colman and Margetts imported knowledge and state-of-the-art machinery from the US. 'The fundamental principle of distillation hasn't changed since it was first invented,' Margetts explains. 'We've got more sophisticated equipment, but you still have to pump steam underneath it and condense what comes off the top.' The shiny distillation equipment is housed in a converted cattle shed. During harvest month, Margetts religiously oversees the distillation alone (he has a small office in the shed so he can continue his other farm duties) with another man out on the field: a model of efficiency and productivity. The spent material is used as a soil improver and all hot water is recycled.

'Fifty per cent of the skill is in the growing and 50% in the distilling,' says Margetts. 'The first year's oil we produced everyone laughed at. We didn't know what we were doing and we burnt it.' But after several years of trial and error, he fine-tuned the process and managed to produce oil of the quality and quantity required. The crop now covers 100 acres. 'We're into our 16th year, but it's only been over the last eight or nine that we've had nice, good-quality oil that we could sell. I'm grateful to Sir Michael that he let me just bang away at this until I got it right, and I'm still trying to make it better. It really is a long-term thing.' Each year's oil is subtly different and, like wine, it improves with age.

A small percentage of the oil is used in Colman's own range of award-winning peppermint creams, teas and room fragrances, and the rest is sold to food producers. The peppermint creams are produced in Lancashire to a bespoke recipe and, though they look quite standard, have a gently penetrating and lasting flavour. The tea is also unique, explains Margetts, and apart from the packaging it is produced entirely on site. For tea, the mint is dried to 4%, so a lot of the oil, and therefore the flavour, is lost. 'We've discovered a way to reintroduce our own peppermint oil back into it to give it a really fresh flavour,' says Margetts. 'It's a process that we keep secret, but it has made an impact on the market.'



Alongside other combinable crops, including oilseed rape, wheat, oats and malting barley, the farm harvests 33 acres of organic lavender – an old English variety called Folgate specifically requested by Neal's Yard, which buys 50% of production. 'A distillation unit will deal with most volatile oils – we've tried coriander, parsley, dill. We just have to make sure we clean it down properly,' explains Margetts. 'It was more accidental than planned, but we realised we could considerably increase the utilisation of our equipment.' The peppermint comes to harvest in mid-August, whereas lavender is ready earlier, in July. In fact, after



> 'IT'S MY AIM TO GET MY PRODUCTS IN ALL THE FARM SHOPS AROUND THE COUNTRY. I'M NOT INTERESTED IN SUPERMARKETS BECAUSE THEY WILL ONLY PUT THE SQUEEZE ON MY COSTS'

several years of bad weather in Provence, French perfume producers are looking to UK growers for a more reliable source of lavender oil, and Summerdown Farm will this year dramatically increase production to meet demand. 'Once you become established and people depend on you, the opportunities come thick and fast,' says Colman. Forty per cent of Summerdown Pure Mint chocolates are now exported abroad, to the US, Scandinavia, the Far East and Australia. The potential is huge.

One thing Colman is clear about is where his products are sold. On the way to the farm we call in at Manydown Farm Shop, which stocks his chocolates and teas. 'This is where I want to be,' he says. 'It's my aim to get my products in all the farm shops around the country. I'm not interested in supermarkets because they will only put the squeeze on my costs. And I'm not prepared to compromise on the quality.' The demand for locally sourced, organic food seems to have weathered the global economic storm, and the number of farm shops has grown considerably over the past 10 years. 'I've been in food distribution all my life and it's a dynamic field. These sorts of stores have made huge strides,' says Colman. 'They fit my concept of how specialised products need to be introduced to people so that they are regularly available.' The internet, too, presents an unprecedented opportunity for producers of niche products. At the moment, Summerdown's internet sales only account for around 5-10%, but it is branching into social media with a Facebook page and Twitter feed in order to spread the word.

Colman believes that there are enough people who want something interesting. And that, he says, is the wonderful thing about business: 'You can take something and build it from scratch into an enterprise. You can create something that wasn't there before.' This is where advisers such as Strutt & Parker can really help their clients. 'Although mine is a tiny little business, this is the sort of opportunity that Strutt & Parker clients are increasingly needing to be alert to because it enables them to exploit their expensive land more intensively.' ■

summerdownmint.com

Photography: Tatham Design Ltd

Sir Michael Colman (below) and his farm manager Ian Margetts (above) have perfected peppermint harvesting at Summerdown Farm. The crop is mown and left to dry for 24-48 hours to lose some of its moisture, then chopped and loaded into mobile distillation units. Back in the distillation shed, steam pipes are attached to heat the product over an hour until a mixture of oil and steam comes up through pipes into a condenser, where it cooks for around three hours. The high-quality, pure oil is then separated from the water

