



Minutes after arriving at Malshanger House in Hampshire I am sipping a cup of aromatic Summerdown peppermint tea while my host, Sir Michael Colman, tells me about it. ‘We dry the leaf – drying tends to lose a bit of the flavour – then we reintroduce the fragrance by adding its own oil. I’m not saying you must like it. What I say is, it’s different.’

That difference has been officially recognised. In 2009 and 2011 the tea, produced on the Colman family farm, won two-star gold in the Great Taste Awards. It followed in the wake of the first Summerdown product launched in 2005, chocolate peppermint creams made from their

own ‘single estate English peppermint oil’; more recent additions are chocolate mint crisps and mint thins (creams and thins were both awarded one-star gold earlier this year). Summerdown chocolates and tea are now sold in Waitrose, Harvey Nichols and Selfridges, among others, while other supermarkets make liqueurs and chocolates using Summerdown peppermint oil.

Ian Margetts, the farm manager, joins us. On the shelves of the outhouse meeting-room where the tea-tasting takes place are bottles of lavender and mint room fragrance and bags of camomile flowers for the spearmint and camomile tea, both recently introduced. I am politely bombarded

with facts about *Mentha x piperita* and inferior *Mentha arvensis*, the history and problems of mint production in Britain, the States and India, menthol, menthone, and how to build a brand, all courtesy of one driven 83-year-old with clear business sense.

Colman’s idea of an amusing project for life after mustard – 45 or so years at the family firm of Reckitt & Colman – was ambitious: to revive the British peppermint crop.

Peppermint had fallen into total abeyance during the Second World War, and it took Colman three and a half years to research and choose the right strain of Black Mitcham peppermint seed

to grow here (Black Mitcham is the variety of *Mentha x piperita* traditionally grown in Britain). Several more years were required to establish the crop, to import state-of-the-art machinery from the USA for distilling the peppermint oil on site, and to select products to make from it. (Sir Michael also ran the Church Commissioners for six years in the 1990s. ‘They’d never had a commercial man before,’ he comments. ‘They were in some disarray.’)

It was, however, just the challenge to appeal to a successful businessman who for decades had listed ‘farming’ as a recreation in his *Who’s Who* entry, but spent more time at Reckitt & Colman’s

Mint condition

It took more than a decade for Sir Michael Colman to re-establish Black Mitcham peppermint in Britain, but the results have been worth the wait. **Annabel Freyberg** heads to Hampshire for a tasting. Photographs by **Andy Sewell**

Above Lady Colman and her dog, Ezra. **Above left** Summerdown mint chocolate pots (recipes overleaf)

HQ in Hull than in the foothills of his Hampshire Downs farm, where 100 acres of *Mentha x piperita*, camomile and lavender now thrive.

Colman inherited a mixed (dairy and arable) farm and the handsome Regency house Malshanger (plus a 16th-century tower built by Archbishop Wareham) from his father (also a director of Reckitt & Colman) in 1961. He was 31, in charge of Reckitt & Colman's overseas market, and had a growing family – he and his wife, Judy, have five children.

He and other local farmers decided to join together 'to make a co-operative with a line of products we could stand behind as a group and

Summerdown mint chocolate pots

serves 6

225g dark chocolate, broken into squares

280ml single cream

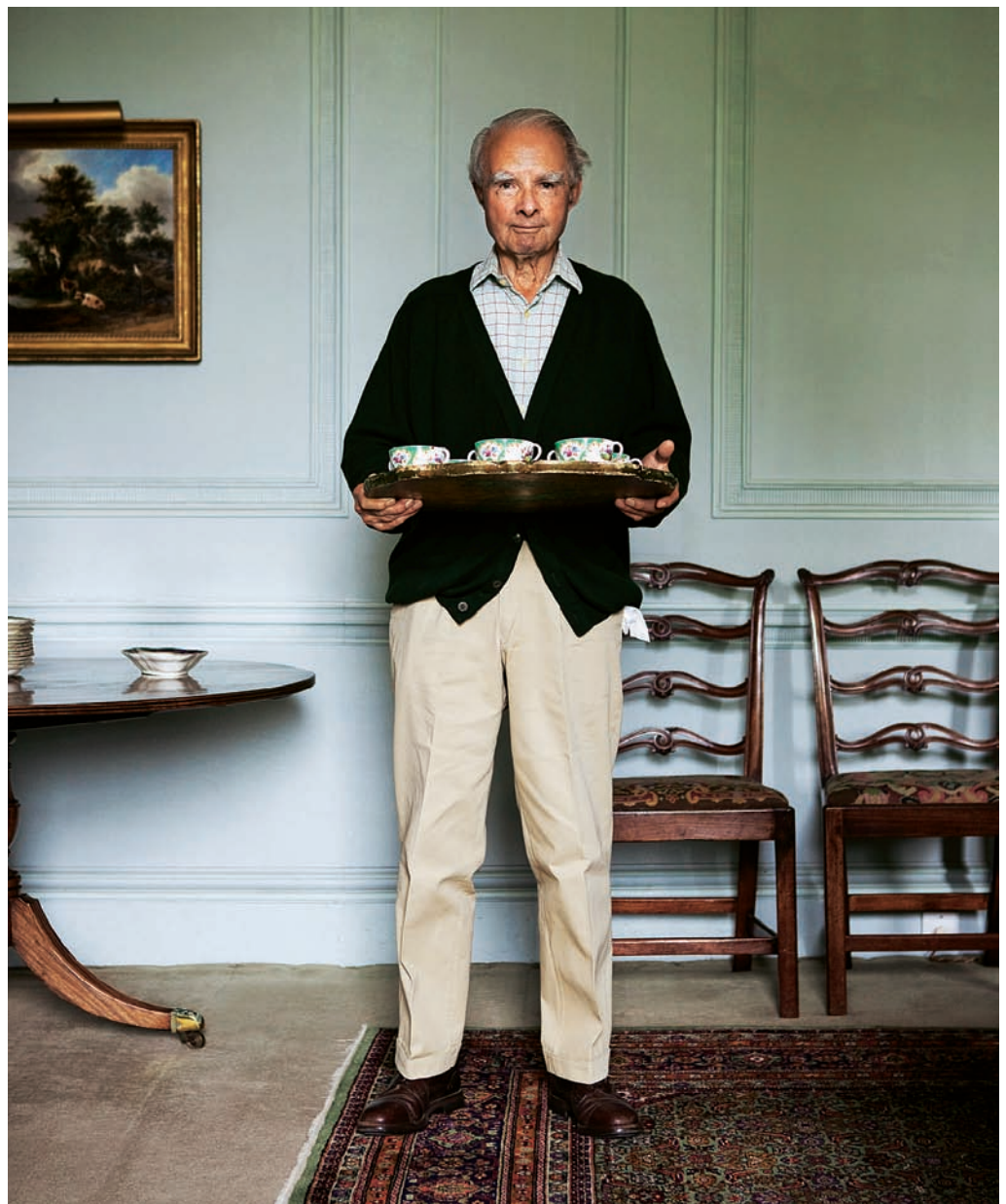
1 egg, lightly beaten

14 drops Summerdown peppermint oil

Put the chocolate in a bowl set over a pan of just boiled water and allow to melt. In a saucepan heat the cream until hot, not boiling. Pour the melted chocolate into the cream and beat with a wooden spoon until well blended. Add the egg and a pinch of salt, beat again until smooth. Add the peppermint oil, and beat again to combine. Pour into six individual pots or small glasses. Chill for several hours, or overnight until quite firm.

Hamish Anderson's wine choice

Graham's 10 Year Old Tawny Port, Douro Valley, Portugal £18.99, Waitrose. With lighter chocolate puds you can sometimes get away with a delicate, floral sweet wine. However, these rich pots require the full monty – anything less will be lost. Port is a well-loved partner of chocolate, and the minty side to these pots is best suited to the lighter, fragrant style of a tawny.



make an impact.' The group settled on peas, but also experimented with peppermint, which was discarded as being too long-term. As the price of peas fell in the 1990s, Colman's thoughts turned again to peppermint. With the agreement of the group, he decided to re-introduce and grow it. 'You have to have something very special to make an impression on retail, where price is a dominant theme,' he asserts. 'The key is not to go for the mass market but for a big enough minority.' Making high-grade peppermint oil (to flavour desserts and sweets), and showing what it was capable of with a small run of edible products, satisfied the criteria perfectly. He accepted that all this would take time, and in the end it

The first product was a peppermint cream. 'Quite a few people prefer us to Bendicks'

Top Sir Michael Colman with a tray of Summerdown mint chocolate pots



Summerdown chocolate slices

makes about 30

225g butter

5 tbsp golden syrup

50g cocoa, sifted

500g digestive biscuits, crushed (or blitzed in a blender)

for the topping

200g dark chocolate

4 drops Summerdown peppermint oil

Put the butter, golden syrup and cocoa in a pan over a low heat, stir gently until melted, then remove from the heat. Stir the crushed biscuits into the melted chocolate mixture.

Blend with a wooden spoon until the whole mixture looks moist. Tip into a greased 20x30cm tin. Press down well, making sure that the mixture is pressed into the corners. Chill for 30 minutes in the fridge.

For the topping Melt the chocolate in a bowl set over a pan of recently boiled water. Add peppermint oil drops and stir the mixture well. When the biscuit base is chilled, pour the topping over, spreading evenly. Put in the fridge and leave until the top has set. Remove from the fridge and cut into squares or rectangles. It will keep well in a sealed container in the fridge.

was 10 years from the start to the launch of the first product, the peppermint creams.

Trim, nattily dressed in cardigan and chinos, with expressive bushy white eyebrows and old-world courtesy, Colman speaks of the enormous pride in manufacturing mustard when he first worked at Reckitt & Colman, which leads on to the Hampshire farmers and to peppermint.

Mentha x piperita is a hybrid of water mint and spearmint (the latter is used in mint sauce and salads), quite different from the lower quality *Mentha arvensis* or corn mint. Britain was known for top-quality peppermint from the mid-18th to early-20th century – the French for peppermint is *menthe Anglaise*. ‘Our Black Mitcham mint is very labour-intensive,’ Colman says, ‘and during two world wars the emphasis was on growing food, so it died out. America took over the production of quality oil and did a first-class job. They found it grew well on the west coast, in Oregon and Montana. There’s a department at the University of Portland, Oregon, that improves varieties. I had my eye on this peppermint and sent my farm manager over there to have a look.’

‘We’ve re-imported and re-established it here. We tried 12 varieties, some from here and some

Peppermint oil is best after three years. ‘It settles and mellows. Every year it is different’

Top three of the Colmans’ grandchildren, Tom, 16, Jeremy, 11, and Natasha, 13, join them for tea



from America. We found a particularly good drought-resistant American strain and that’s the one we’ve mainly developed. For four years, we picked the brains of farmers and academics in Montana, Oregon and Washington, where Black Mitcham is produced on an industrial scale.

Eight years down the line, in 2003, having established the crop, his next job was to take it to market. That was where the sweets came in – to show off an oil whose ‘pure mint flavour is perfect for an aroma product or confectionery. It leaves a lingering taste in the mouth.’

‘I had the concept for a whole line,’ he explains. The small run of chocolates was designed ‘so people could see what high-grade oil is like.’ First up, he wanted to make ‘a chocolate peppermint that looked like Bendicks but was different’. He consulted the confectionery guru Brian Jackson, who now oversees its manufacture in Preston. ‘Quite a few people prefer us to Bendicks,’ Colman tells me.

Next came peppermint tea, which he describes as ‘an open goal – Twining’s, the brand leader, produces quite ordinary tea.’ His product is



designed 'to give more satisfaction'. The leaf is stripped from the stalk by a converted bean stripper, and 'we've invested in a drying plant. It's 20 minutes away, so frightfully convenient; we can control the product from field to consumer.'

Now I'm given a crash course in peppermint oil. 'The peppermint people buy is in the hands of the oil refiners,' Colman says. 'They import quality oil from America and blend it with cheaper oil from India.' Some 3,500 tons of *Mentha x piperita* are produced each year in the States, compared with 30,000 tons of Indian

Coffee mint creams makes 20-22 creams

225g icing sugar, sifted

2 level tsp instant coffee powder

30g unsalted butter, melted

1½ tbsp lukewarm milk

4 drops Summerdown peppermint oil

Put the sifted icing sugar and coffee powder in a bowl. Combine the butter with the milk. Stir gradually into the icing sugar, mixing well together.

Add the peppermint oil and mix again.

Turn on to a board lightly dusted with icing sugar. Knead until smooth. Roll out to about 5mm thickness. Cut into suitable shapes or roll into small balls. Transfer to paper cases and leave in a cool place until firm.

Mentha arvensis, whose character is bitter rather than creamy. 'The blenders are clever, they remove unattractive qualities and make an acceptable product at an extremely modest price – but with little character. It's a good example of what's happened in the food industry,' he adds.

Colman explains that peppermint oil needs to be six months old before it is sold, but is even better after two or three years. 'It settles and mellows. Every year the oil is subtly different.'

Summerdown now has a staff of six on the farm, plus Jackson and a marketing consultant. It has the capacity to produce two tons of oil a year, and could sell more. Ten per cent goes into its own chocolates and the rest is sold to others, including Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury's and the Co-op. Turnover has more than doubled over the past three years.

We head off to the peppermint, which is harvested in June for tea, in August for oil. Colman admits that 'it's difficult to grow – being a shallow rooter and sensitive to temperature and soil – unlike the garden variety.' We stop at a large field of two-year-old mint (the crop is at its peak from years three to seven or eight) with a cricket pitch at one end and beehives the other. 'There are a few gaps and quite a lot of weeds,' Colman points out. 'The reason is not enough moisture. A solid carpet is what we like. 'You really get the aroma when you walk through it,' he says.

'A cracking bit of mint,' he adds as he regards a stem with purple flowers. 'We want good rain in May and June and then for the sun to come out and stay that way.'

Back at the house tea is laid out on the terrace – tempting treats of chocolate pots and coffee creams flavoured with Summerdown oil. Four of



the Colmans' 13 grandchildren arrive: 21-year-old Augustus and his cousins Tom, 16, Natasha, 13, and 11-year-old Jeremy. There's a lot of teasing, and only occasional references to peppermint. 'A few drops of peppermint oil on a sugar lump are great for indigestion,' Colman says.

After tea, we make our way to the barn where the peppermint oil is steam-distilled under Ian Margetts' expert eye; the air is intensely scented. A trailer filled with peppermint is backed in, and steam fed through a large pipe attached to its bottom, cooking the contents over several hours.

An 'elephant trunk' on top lets the resulting steam out via a condenser into a pyramid-shaped separator that divides it into water and oil. 'I can't tell you the pleasure of putting together a team of people who are enthusiastic about what they do,' Colman beams. 'The quality of the product is key.' With Chocolate Mini Bars (slim peppermint creams) being launched this month and more in the pipeline, there's not much prospect of retirement for a long time yet.

Summerdown peppermint oil is available from Neal's Yard and online at summerdownmint.com

