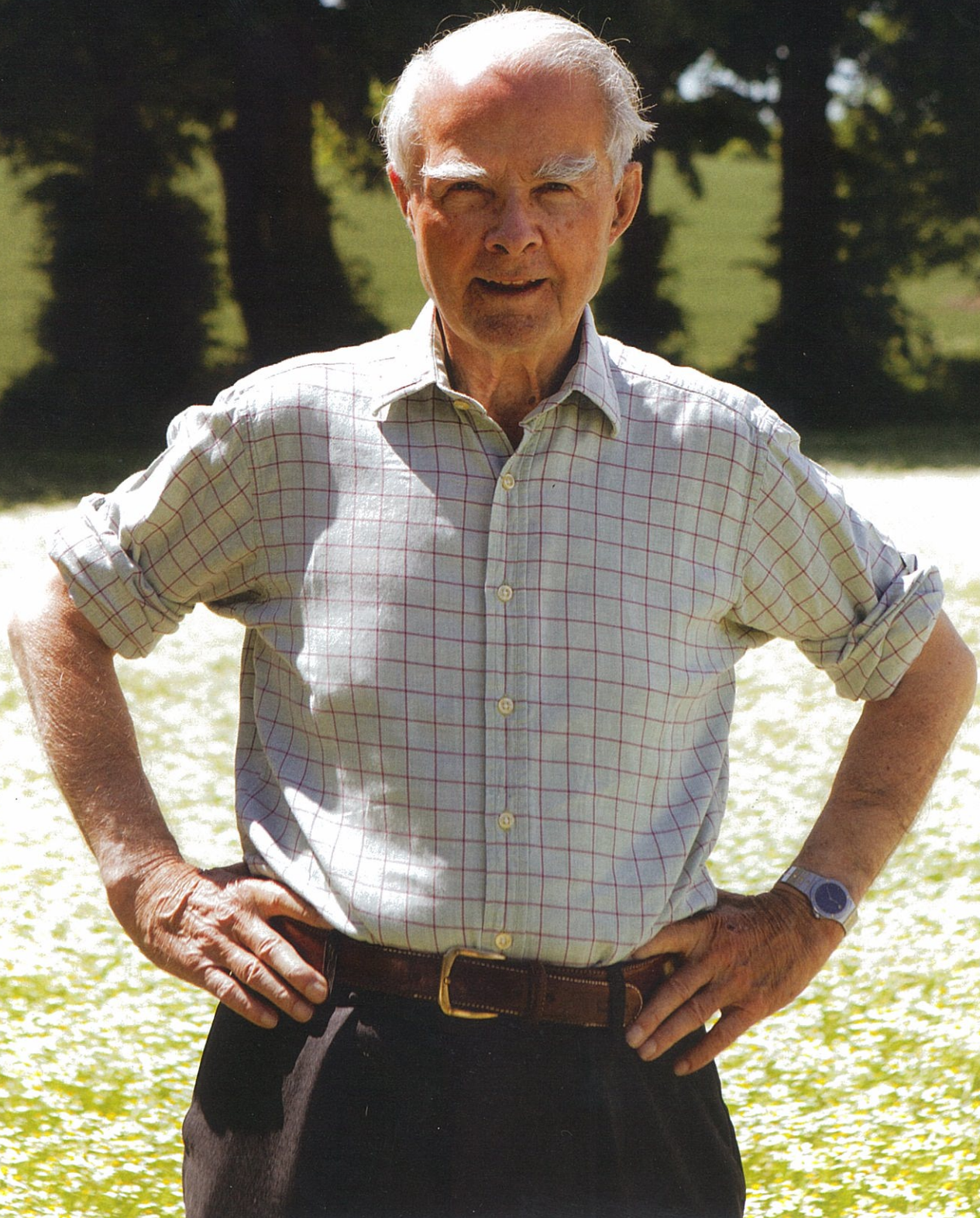


# How Sir Michael is minting it in

Sir Michael Colman has been turning back the clock to go forward. English Black Mitcham peppermint was once known throughout the world, but has long-since ceased to be grown. Now Sir Michael has re-introduced it and told Simon Ellis that quality is key to his success



A century ago, England grew the best peppermint – Black Mitcham or *Menthe anglaise* – in the world. But the pressure to grow more food crops as a result of two world wars, coupled with rising labour costs, brought about a steady decline in cultivation.

As has so often been the case, America took over where England left off, becoming the main producer of top-quality peppermint oil. That is the way the situation may have remained, had it not been for the determination, entrepreneurial skills and money of Sir Michael Colman, who owns the 2,000-acre Summerdown Farm estate at Malshanger, near Basingstoke.

During the past decade, following years of research and trials, Sir Michael has re-introduced traditional Black Mitcham peppermint to the English countryside.

“Oil refiners in this country have done a wonderful job importing and blending peppermint oil from the USA and India, but it’s not what we are producing,” Sir Michael said. “Ours is a single estate, pure peppermint oil. I am not saying everybody thinks Black Mitcham oil is better, but that it is different. We introduced something that was not available in Britain – a single estate, quality peppermint oil.

“It’s like wine. Blended wine can be very palatable, but if you buy a single estate, chateau wine you can tell the difference in that it has more character, a greater depth of flavour. When people taste products made from Black Mitcham mint, they know it’s our mint.”

Sir Michael – part of the Colman’s mustard dynasty – went on: “I think we are Britain’s only active supplier of pure peppermint oil to the consumer.”

Sir Michael’s aim was not to produce a niche product. Instead “we were looking for a crop where we could fit ourselves into the supply chain in a more advantageous way.”

He wanted to sell top-notch products directly to customers at a premium price, supplying his distilled oil, for example, to Marks & Spencer and his own estate-branded products to the public – mainly through farmers’ shops, as well as via certain other retailers, including Harvey Nichols and Selfridges.

“By selling its own chocolate mints made from our oil, M & S is developing the market for us, making people aware of the difference between products made from blended oils and products made from a pure, single estate oil,” said Sir Michael.

“Consumers are now getting a taste for quality pure oil, which blenders are not interested in supplying. We want the consumer to recognise there is a difference between blended and quality pure oil and to have a choice.”

Summerdown Mint’s products include chocolate peppermints, and peppermint tea, oil and sweets. Organic lavender oil, is made from estate-grown lavender.

Sir Michael works with three factories on a contract basis. The first makes his chocolates, the second his sweets and the third his tea bags. A fourth is helping to develop air fresheners.

“I am used to working with teams of people and that’s exactly what I am doing with my peppermint oil products – employing people who are experts in their field, like my marketing consultant, Anthony Terry, whose father was chairman of Terry’s Chocolates.”

Sir Michael aims to get Summerdown mint products into every farm shop in the country. “That’s where we would like to be.”

The demand for Summerdown’s peppermint oil is growing all the time. “The number of people coming to us for oil is continuing to rise, so we’ve had to expand production.”

Until recently, the estate grew peppermint on 80 acres of land. Now that figure is 100 acres.

“The main increase in output has come from much-improved yields.”

When Sir Michael decided to re-introduce Black Mitcham mint, he and farm manager, Ian Margetts, turned to America, which had mechanised the commercial production of English peppermint in a big way.

“Ian went to the US to find out how they did things and use that knowledge for making a commercial fist of producing pure oil here.”

Learning from the Americans “was a necessary evil,” according to Ian. “There was nobody in this country with the



necessary skills who could tell us what to do, including the Ministry of Agriculture.

“In the early 20th century, a lot of peppermint was grown in England. We were famous throughout the world for the quality of our oil.

“We’ve now brought back the lost skills and developed them – the learning curve was very steep – to suit our climatic conditions.”

Sir Michael added: “Ian, who has been to the US four or five times, is now the country’s only expert on growing, harvesting and distilling pure peppermint oil.

“I believe in innovation. I was fortunate enough to be employed in a growing company with business all over the world and well paid for my troubles, so I was in a position to put something back. A young man in his 20s starting a business has to be very cautious with every penny. I knew what I wanted to do, had the resources to do it and put into place everything that was necessary to do the job.

“We imported everything we needed from America. In any case, there is only one supplier of the specialised equipment.”

As farm manager, Ian is responsible for the day to day running of the whole estate, the main crops being wheat for bread making, oats for cereals and spring barley for malting.

“We wanted top quality and to get that you have to do everything exactly right,” Ian said. “Distilling is where you can make or break it.

“I get a huge buzz when I go into a shop, see our products on display and think, ‘I am involved with this’. It’s a hugely satisfying job.”

Despite being in his 80s, Sir Michael has no intention of putting his feet up. “Building new businesses is fantastically rewarding. What’s more, it keeps me alert!”

Opposite page: Sir Michael Colman; Left: Some of the products; Above: The mint he grows



#### FURTHER INFORMATION

Website: [www.summerdownmint.com](http://www.summerdownmint.com)