



Sir Michael Colman introduces Paula Thompson to the fragrant world of mint farming at Summerdown Farm

mint condition

One step into the estate office at Summerdown Farm near Basingstoke is enough to reveal exactly what is grown here. Even indoors, the unmistakable scent of fresh mint wafts through the air.

A short four-wheel drive later and I'm standing amid the rolling Hampshire countryside, calf deep in rich, green mint fields.

With me, is the man who presides over all this mintyness – Sir Michael Colman (Mr Mustard himself).

Instead of retiring when he left the family firm at the age of 67, Sir Michael turned his attention to farming mint, utilising the 2,000-acre Malshanger estate left to him by his late father in the 1960s.

And despite knowing “absolutely nothing about farming” he has succeeded in re-establishing traditional Black Mitcham mint to England – a crop that hadn't been farmed in this country since the Second World War.

At 83, Sir Michael remains remarkably sprightly, stooping every now and again to rub a mint leaf between finger and thumb, relishing the zesty fragrance of his crop.

He carries a rough brown satchel, which he delves into at intervals, producing various minty products for me to try: delicious peppermint drops from a silver tin, smartly packaged cartons of peppermint and camomile tea and, best of all, boxes of decadent after

dinner chocolates.

Then there's his latest innovation, a range of room scent diffusers incorporating the farm's lavender oil (Summerdown has 14 acres of lavender and counts skincare company Neal's Yard among its customers).

The products – all made with pure English peppermint oil, painstakingly distilled on site – are destined for farm shops, delis and garden centres up and down the country, while its luxury chocolates are in demand from the likes of Selfridges and Harvey Nichols.

As we chomp on some crispy mint thins, a consignment of boxed goodies are already on their way to The Big Feastival, Jamie Oliver's large-scale food festival on Clapham Common.

Meanwhile the remainder of the 1,500-2,000 kilos of peppermint oil produced here this year will be sold directly to confectioners, including big name customers Sainsbury's and M&S as well as clients in America, Australia and Europe.

Over the last 15 years, Sir Michael and his trusted farm manager Ian Margetts have developed the business, relearning lost farming skills from America and importing and adapting the latest production techniques and technologies for their farm in the foothills of the Hampshire Downs.

In the process, Summerdown has grown from something of an experiment to a burgeoning business with 100 acres of mint fields and its own distillation plant.



Sir Michael Colman

For Sir Michael it is a labour of love that dates back 30 years.

“When my father left me Malshanger I didn't know anything about farming, but I had friends – neighbouring farmers – who agreed to form a syndicate,” he says. “The idea was to handle crops that wouldn't be financially viable for an individual farm.

My colleagues had the farming expertise and I had the business knowledge (he'd spent four decades at Reckitt & Colman in Hull rising from shop floor to chairman's office) so my role was to help steer the direction we would go in. I learnt a lot about farming in that time.”

Starting with 3,000 acres of peas, the



syndicate switched to mushrooms when the market began to falter, but found it wasn't profitable. In the 1970s they trialled their first batch of peppermint, trying over 30 varieties in a plot the size of a tennis court. Quickly realising they couldn't grow mint on a large enough scale to make it profitable as a group venture, Sir Michael decided to go it alone.

It would take four years and several fact-finding trips to Montana, where Black Mitcham is grown on an industrial scale, before he learnt how to grow it in any meaningful way in Hampshire.

The next task was convincing the



The art of oil production

industry to buy into it.

Once a thriving crop in Britain, the production of peppermint oil went into decline during the Second World War when the emphasis was on essential food crops.

Realising his beloved peppermint was no longer a priority crop, Sir Michael had to do some shrewd marketing, emphasising the quality of his pure peppermint oil over cheaper, imported blended oils.

"I had to get people to realise what they were missing – what pure oil had that blended oil lacked," he explained.

"Cheaper, blended oil was minty but characterless. Pure mint is less harsh, more mellow and the flavour lasts longer."

He insists I try another peppermint drop

to fully appreciate the aromatic flavour.

"That residual flavour you get is the menthol," he enthuses. "45 per cent of our peppermint oil is menthol and it's critical to the quality. Pure oil may take longer

to produce but it has a character and quality that blended oils lack.

"Even when I started out, I could sense that the multiple grocer trade would become boring in the end. If you have to compete on price, you're going to end up with a mediocre product.

"I can't supply multiple grocers at a price, so I have to tell the consumer what they're missing.

"I've had to develop the market as well as the product and not many people have the time or the patience to do that."

Looking out across the curve of the mint field, Sir Michael tells me he has started to visualise his plots in terms of products: one

acre equates to 1,000 bottles of room scent.

While he won't divulge how much he has invested into the farm, he does reveal it isn't making a huge amount of money just yet.

"At the moment, relative to the value of an acre we're not producing a good return on capital so I'm looking at how to change that. It takes a long time to develop that sort of thinking and that sort of business.

"I've been at it for over 30 years and only really applied myself fully when I retired."

He guffaws when asked if he plans to put his feet up now.

"I can't! I'm in the middle of it! I've told my son that if I get the business to a certain

level, he can take over."

This year has been particularly challenging.

"It's been dry, dry, dry so the mint was slow to come up."

But he is confident the yield will still be a good one.

Harvesting takes place between July and September when the crop is chopped and distributed into mobile distillation units known as 'cooker tubs' (a bit like empty lorry containers).

Pipes running along the bottom of the units produce steam which breaks down the oil glands in the peppermint leaf and produces condensation.

The condensed oil is fed first into a steam boiler – a bit like a giant kettle – and then a condenser where the oil and water separate.

The whole process takes four hours: one hour to reach the correct temperature (a closely guarded Summerdown secret) and three hours to 'cook'.

"The menthol evaporates quickly but there are lots of components and to create pure oil they all need to come out," explains farm manager Ian.

"Peppermint is like fine wine and that's how we treat it. We keep it for at least two years so it mellows. Each load is logged

and stored in 45-gallon lacquer lined barrels. A 2010 yield will be subtly different to a 2011 yield.

Before being barrelled it is kept in a holding vessel for several months to settle. Then it is filtered to remove all impurities leaving us with the highest quality pure peppermint oil.

"I still get a thrill from seeing the products on the shelves and knowing I had a

hand in making them.

"We've built this up from nothing. In farming you only get one chance a year. If you get it wrong you have to wait another year. It's a long process and we're still learning 15 years on."

Sir Michael nods his head in agreement.

"To develop a business like this is a lifetime's work," he says. "My father would probably have thought I was crazy but farming is all about innovating. What I'm doing here is not diversification – it's just a way of using the farm.

And with the tour over, Sir Michael reaches into the depths of his satchel once more, retrieves a selection of mint chocolates, sweets and a scent diffuser and packs the aromatic gifts into my car before waving me off down the estate's tree lined drive.

I had to get people to realise what they were missing – what pure oil had that blended oil lacked



summerdownmint.com