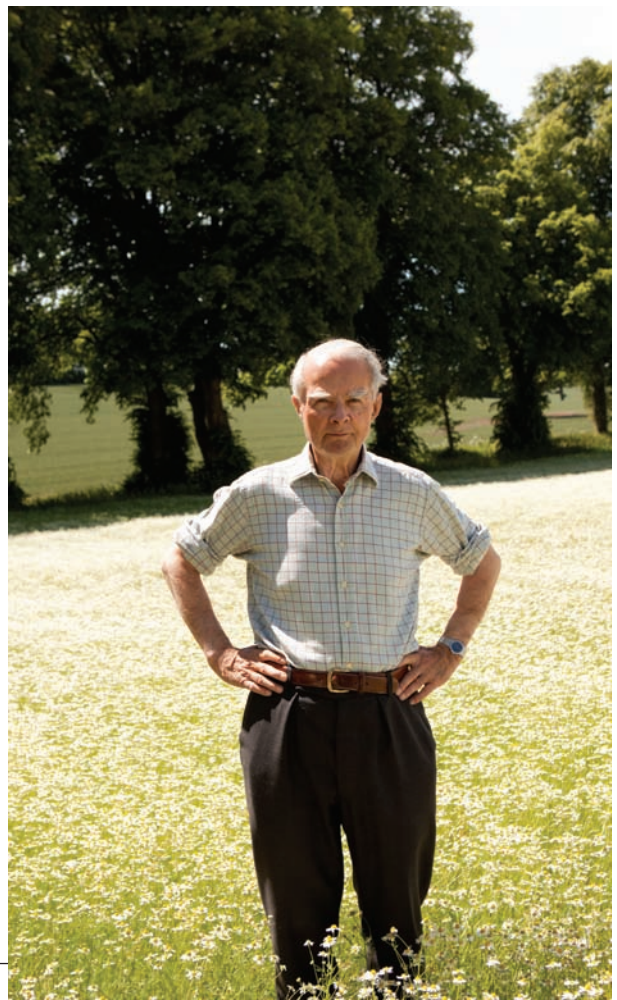


# Mr Mustard's Mint

## Sir Michael Colman's passion for quality informs his every decision at Summerdown Farms. Ben Broughton gets a taste of it



“I don't believe in retirement,” says a categorical Sir Michael Colman, who's a sprightly 83. After serving over forty years at the family's iconic mustard firm, working his way up from the shop floor to the board room, Sir Michael left the city to return to the corner of Hampshire where he grew up. But rather than enjoying a quiet life in his handsome Regency home, he turned his attentions to an entirely new project, re-establishing the link between England and quality peppermint oil.

Many years ago Sir Michael, a CGA member, was part of a farming syndicate growing peas, but when that became unviable all the members began to look elsewhere for profit. They must have been a bunch with foresight; one set up the thriving Vitacress watercress business, another was instrumental in introducing oil seed rape, those fields of bright yellow flowers we're now so familiar with, into the country, and yet another diversified into a busy bulb-growing business.

Sir Michael was more captivated by a few experiments the group had made in growing peppermint. In particular the old cultivar Black Mitcham (named after the Mitcham nursery in Surrey where it was developed) which dates back to 1750. Black Mitcham mint has the highest level of essential oil in its almost black leaves, but, when Sir Michael began cultivating it, it hadn't been grown in the UK for nearly fifty years. “Because it was very labour intensive to grow and we needed food production to be stepped up during the Second World War, the production of quality English peppermint was diminished totally in this country,” explains Sir Michael.

Before the war, England had been the prime source of high quality oil. Indeed the French still

call peppermint *menthe Anglaise*. Sir Michael has a contemporary who can remember working in his father's confectionary factory in South Africa as a boy, “They used to import barrels of pure Mitcham peppermint from the UK for their sweets, but that's seventy years ago now. These days confectioners use a blend of low grade, cheap mint oil which has undergone a variety of processes to refine out negative flavours.”

After the war when English production had ceased, the Americans recognised the quality of Black Mitcham varieties, took them on, and established them on their west coast. After four years of their own experimenting and several fact-finding trips to Oregon and Montana where Black Mitcham is now grown on an industrial scale, Colman and his farm manager Ian Margetts began growing their first crops of peppermint in the mid 1990s. The pride both Sir Michael and Ian feel about reintroducing such a quintessentially English crop to the country is palpable. “We've had to learn our way around,” says Ian, who's been working with Sir Michael for 29 years. “We had to learn how to grow this crop and how to distil the oil to end up with a quality product. We couldn't get any advice in this country, but the Americans welcomed me with open arms, teaching me how to manage it and how to distil it. And that is the key bit; you can make or break the crop during the distilling process.”

Indeed, Ian admits, the first year's harvest went literally down the drain when he tried to distil the mint oil at far too high a temperature. He says he can look back now and laugh at the incident, but, as he points out, a year's a long time to wait to try again and correct your mistakes.

The farm the pair runs together is immaculate,

**“If you stand in our fields in the summer, the aroma coming off them is just remarkable”**



and a brief tour takes me first to a field of mint. Stepping out of the Land Rover, the intense smell hits you immediately. A sunny morning after some welcome rain is the perfect time to experience the scent of the mint plants in late spring. They haven't grown to their full height yet, but will reach nearly a metre before they flower, are cut, left to dry briefly then processed swiftly.

My pleasure at smelling a whole field of intense mint is exactly what Sir Michael wishes to share with the world. "If you stand in our fields in the summer, the aroma coming off them is just remarkable. I'd love everybody to come and stand with me and enjoy

the fresh aroma of English grown quality essential oils. But, as that's not possible, the next best thing I can do is put it in bottles and make it available."

The process of making the essential oil is as careful an operation as those used by winemakers. Indeed both Sir Michael and Ian use the analogy. "You can't sell fresh oil," explains Ian, "It needs to mature for about two years. It loses the sharp edge fresh oil has; it mellows in the barrel like a fine wine. And Sir Michael continues, "There are plenty of blended wines which are perfectly tasty but they're not the same as a handpicked varietal product which may need some keeping in order to make it acceptable, but which has far more flavour and character. The same applies to peppermint oil."

I'm shown the converted cattle sheds where the standard American distillation equipment stands;

glittering stainless steel with pipes and hoses for delivering just the right temperatures and conditions to extract oil in its peak condition. There's a fleet of five trailers which bring the mint leaves in after harvest to be processed, and over the summer Ian is based here for about six weeks in 50°C+ heat overseeing the alchemy.

So what motivates Sir Michael? Primarily a food industry which he feels sells people short. "The multiple grocery trade dominates the distribution of food in this country. The downward pressure from them on the price of any product coming into their distribution network is relentless."

"We have stuck to pure oil. We're not going to compromise with any blend at all. What we have been able to establish is that our product tastes different. This is what pure peppermint tastes like. It has a more enduring, lingering taste in the mouth and throat that a blended oil will lack."

To get his message out to people, Sir Michael began producing chocolate peppermint creams five years ago, (a box of which is pressed on me to share at the CGA office), followed by chocolate mint crisps and thins, peppermint travel sweets, and then tea. In a month when it was announced that Bendicks Bittermint production will move from Winchester to Germany, the single-estate, English-made credentials of Summerdown's chocolates is something to be very proud of.

The farm's newest products are bottles of essential-oil fragrance diffusers. Peppermint is combined with lavender grown on the farm (when they can wrest supplies away from a Provencal perfumer who has asked this British farm to supply him with as much lavender oil as possible), and camomile grown just twenty minutes away. Packaged in pretty glass bottles, the scents disperse subtly but unmistakably. So this is Sir Michael's dream realised; a bottled version of the heady smells of his farm. One might say, the sweet smell of success.



## Win a selection of Summerdown Mint Treats

We're delighted to be able to offer members the chance to win a collection of one of each of Summerdown's products. Their Chocolate Peppermint Creams won a bronze award from the Academy of Chocolate when they were first launched in 2005. The Chocolate Mint Thins, discs of rich dark chocolate flavoured with pure peppermint oil, won gold in last year's Great Taste Awards, and their delicious

Chocolate Mint Crisps are thin, crispy mints made with rich, dark chocolate in a stylishly elegant box, which complement any occasion. Summerdown also produce two aromatic teas, pure English Peppermint Tea, another Great Taste Award winner, and English Spearmint and Camomile tea, a refreshing and light combination. And the selection will also contain the new room fragrances, which have just been produced.

To enter for your chance to win, complete and return the Prize Draw and Enquiry form (found at page 66) or email with your name and address to [competition@thecga.co.uk](mailto:competition@thecga.co.uk). The prize will be drawn on 20 July 2011 from all entries submitted.

