

# VIP *Very important producer*

Sir Michael Colman, scion of the mustard-making family, reveals how English peppermint kept him in the food industry and out of retirement

**I wouldn't dream of competing with my father's Colman's mint sauce.** It's a very good product. Besides, it's made with spearmint, not the Black Mitcham peppermint that we use, so we're not really in the same playing field.

**Black Mitcham mint used to grow all over Britain** – in France, they call it *menthe Anglaise*. The leaves have a tinge of black, which is where the name came from. It's our traditional, quality mint.

**The Second World War basically put a stop to it.** It's a very labour-intensive crop and the industry, worldwide, is in decline. Hopefully, our Summerdown products will help to resurrect it.

**The Americans grow more Black Mitcham mint than we do.** I took my farm manager there and we've put their methodology to use on our farm here in Hampshire. **Peppermint oil used to be pot-stilled, a bit like whisky.** We now extract the oil using steam (the most efficient method – one we picked up in the States), then we age it for up to three years, to mellow it. **Summerdown tea is the next best thing to fresh mint tea.** Fresh peppermint leaves have about 70 per cent moisture in them; the dried ones have four per cent. You lose a lot of flavour with the moisture, so we add a bit of our peppermint oil to the leaves to reinvigorate them.

**The majority of peppermint products you buy are made with *Mentha arvensis*.** It has a harsher flavour than our mint, but it's easier to grow. Black Mitcham, aka *Mentha piperita*, has a much cooler, more rounded flavour. **Confectionery cookbook author Brian Jackson helped create the recipes for our chocolates** – mint thins and fondant creams. I'm working on travel mints in little tins. **I couldn't imagine anything worse than retiring.** I never intended to go back into food, but I was about to draw stumps and realised I needed to do something to fill the gap. I'd like to leave some kind of legacy before I'm sent back to the pavilion.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID YEO

