



From left: Jo Colman, Sir Michael Colman, and farm manager Ian Margetts.

Thrings Eats...

with Jo Colman, Summerdown Mint

Sue Cornell, a Legal Director in the Romsey office of the law firm Thrings, finds out how a mission to bring a long-lost herb back to England grew into a business with a unique flavour.

Jo Colman has no problem summing up what Summerdown Mint is all about. "We're the peppermint people," he says. "We grow the best peppermint in the world, we harvest it with an exceptionally talented team, and at the end of the process we've got a phenomenal essential oil."

This vision has remained unchanged since 1995 when Jo's grandfather Sir Michael Colman decided against retirement and, at 67, set himself the task of restoring Black Mitcham peppermint to England. The herb, prized for its pure, bright character, had previously been all but lost to these shores.

Sir Michael, whose family founded the Colman's mustard empire, brought micro-cuttings of Black Mitcham back from Oregon, USA. He and farm manager Ian Margetts first planted them in the family's kitchen garden before transferring them to fields on the Hampshire Downs at Malshanger.

Fast-forward 35 years and Ian is still there, tending the 3,000 acres of farm and woodland where nearly 100 acres

of peppermint is grown before being harvested and distilled into a uniquely aromatic oil used in branded chocolates, tea, home fragrances and beauty products.

Jo, whose previous career included experience in sales and product development for Hampshire-based Jude's Ice Cream, joined the business full-time three years ago. He's passionate when asked why he believes Summerdown Mint is special.

"Every peppermint plant that we have comes from those tiny original cuttings, so it's a very consistent and distinctive flavour," he says. "The other thing we do, that no-one else does, is barrel age the mint. Ian discovered that by leaving it in a sealed barrel for two years, you transform the flavour."

"The mint that comes fresh off the still is heavy on menthol, acidic and harsh. We leave it for two years and the profile has balanced out and you get a completely rounded, moreish flavour that is quite unlike any other peppermint you've experienced before."

Sir Michael, now 91, is very much involved and has regular catch-ups with Jo. "My grandfather has phenomenal business experience and being able to glean that from him is really valuable. It's enabled us to build a really good, strong business relationship. He's still involved in signing off the key decisions, but there's a healthy balance and he'll happily sit back and trust the fantastic team that we've built."



Aside from mint, the farm has added lavender, chamomile, spearmint and dill to its fields, supplying oils to quality names such as Neal's Yard Remedies and Fortnum & Mason. So far, Jo has decided not to work with supermarkets or Amazon, focusing on direct sales through the Summerdown Mint website and valued relationships with smaller stockists.

"We enjoy the work that local retailers do and work with them in a way that has seen our business and theirs grow together," he says over a video call during the coronavirus restrictions.

"The lockdown has been an affirmation of that decision. In the run-up to Easter we saw a spike in chocolate sales, as we would expect, but that happened during the most extraordinary and challenging weeks in living memory. That just really underlined to me that we have a fantastic set of local retailers who care passionately about sourcing high-quality British products - and customers who feel the same." ♦



Sue Cornell,
Thrings

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