



A LITTLE-KNOWN FRUIT CHANGED THE LIVES OF A HAWKE'S BAY COUPLE FROM CORPORATE TO CONDIMENT CREATION

WORDS ANN WARNOCK PHOTOGRAPHS FLORENCE CHARVIN

FOR WELLINGTON-BORN businesswoman Margie Chambers, it's fortunate that she often verbalized the sentiment "never say never". "If you'd said to me a while ago that by the time I was 40 I'd have met someone, married and be making damson plum paste – or actually damson plum anything – I would have said you're crazy."

Crazy indeed but less than eight years ago Margie's run-of-the-mill Mondays involved full make-up, black suit, lofty heels, Wellington Airport and 10 hours of corporate cut and thrust. Hurtle forward to 2014 and she's in Hawke's Bay in a hairnet, shorts, sneakers and T-shirt and her modus operandi is converting 20 kilos of damson-plum pulp into gourmet condiments in a compact commercial kitchen adjoining the revamped 1930s' cottage she shares with her husband Tom.

But that business acumen, formerly used to merge, acquire or restructure, has not been put out to pasture. Rather it's now propelling an artisan food business that has morphed from farmers' market stall to supplying more than 100 selected food stores and supermarkets across the country – and all founded on a forgotten blue-hued plum, shaped like a large olive, with a stone that sticks.

"If you peel off a bit of skin and squeeze there's absolutely no juice – it's tart and dry. You don't eat damsons raw; they must be cooked and then you experience the taste – a deep, full flavour. The trees are disease resistant and were once prolific in the United Kingdom, especially popular in Victorian times," says Tom, a horticulturalist who trained at Lincoln University and worked on cherry orchards in Central Otago before buying his three-hectare property near Havelock North in the early 1990s. He says the demise of the damson can be attributed to its difficult handling and the introduction of berries and other new fruits which superseded the small, green-fleshed plum.

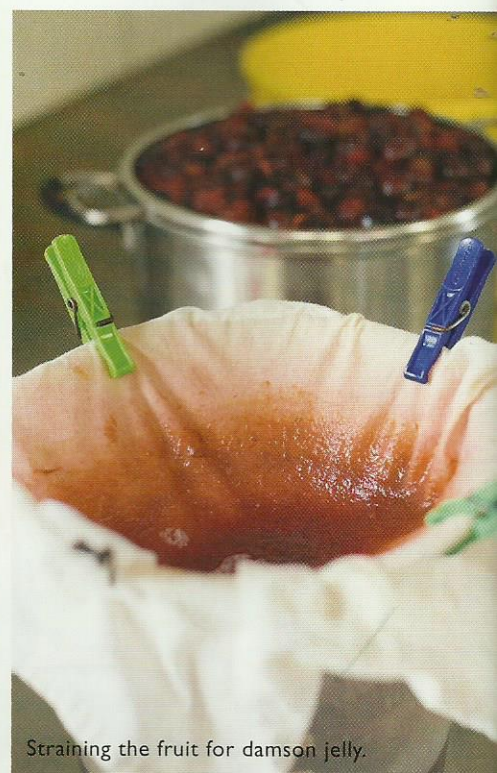
Five years ago, Margie and Tom drove through England's Lake District, searching for evidence of a supposed revival of the damson, but found little. "There were hedgerows but we didn't see any commercial orchards. And while we saw damson chutney and jam in shops, no one appeared to be experimenting with damson products."

Margie and Tom's experimentation, trialling and now crafting of nine products that make up The Damson Collection can be traced back to an amorous soirée with a bottle of home-made damson gin. And their back story could well serve as a film script for a romantic comedy about changing lives. ►

Blocks of damson terrine, Margie's latest project, made with walnuts from A Cracker of a Nut in Christchurch.



Margie makes damson vinaigrette.



Straining the fruit for damson jelly.



Kevin Beltrame and Catherine Rusby in picking mode.

Here's the plot. Six-year-old Tom emigrates from Worcestershire, where he romped with his siblings in a home orchard, to Christchurch with his father, a doctor, and hard-working mother. In their luggage is a copy of *The Constance Spry Cookery Book*. On a family outing in the Weka Pass Tom's father takes a cutting from a damson tree on the side of the road. He plants it at home, it flourishes and years later when Tom has his own orchard in Hawke's Bay he plants a hedgerow with suckers from his father's tree.

Tom is an orchardist but he's restless. He enrolls at Victoria University, embarks on an arts degree and seeks a room to rent. Near the university lives a businesswoman – a mad-keen cook – who spends much of the week in Auckland. She's been burgled and thinks a flatmate would solve the problem. Tom advertises; Margie answers. Tom, who makes damson gin from his hedgerow, opens a bottle for Margie. Voilà – a new life and livelihood in the country unfold.

"When I tasted it I couldn't believe it. It was so beautiful. I thought it needed to be shared with others. And I suppose with all these things it's timing. I felt I wanted to create something." Armed with high-level energy, verve, Tom's own copy of the *The Constance Spry Cookery Book* and the addition of a third partner, friend and

businesswoman Catherine Rusby, they gave themselves a three-year lead-in to a 2009 launch.

The orchard holding was developed to include 400 damson trees. Product taste testing via EIT Hawke's Bay gave the thumbs up but identified a key problem – no one had heard of a damson plum. It shaped their marketing mantra. Food innovation network The FOODBOWL supported their trials, the sharing spirit of Hawke's Bay's food industry was a boon and the discovery that a nearby fruit-processing plant could cook, pit and package the plum pulp in hot-fill bags with a 12-month shelf life was a game breaker. It allowed the flexibility to whip up batches of product according to demand. "It made the business viable," says Margie.

She says the damson plums' high pectin levels aid the setting process. Products are preservative and additive free and sugar is kept to a minimum. "We are purists; we like the tartness. There is no damson plum sauce yet because I can't get the distinctive damson flavour I want, even after trying nine recipes." While the orchard is not organic it is spray free and sustainable principles are to the fore. Glass packaging is more expensive than plastic but is used because it's recyclable. Waste plums are used as compost.

Margie says working alongside her team of five casual staff is a joy. They operate on the basis of preparing monthly product unit levels rather than working rostered hours. While part of the crop is hand-picked for direct fresh sales, other trees are mechanically harvested. The 400 trees produce about four and a half tonnes of plums per annum.

Harvest is short (four days), sweet and convivial with a team of Catherine's girlfriends from her corporate days in Sydney flying in en masse to help. There are groaning harvest lunches prepared by Margie and at the end of the day some sipping of that life-changing damson gin, now rebranded as damson liqueur.

"I used to be an introverted Englishman," says Tom, walking beneath his laden trees, "but I'm coming out of my shell!" And so too is the damson plum coming out of the shadows.

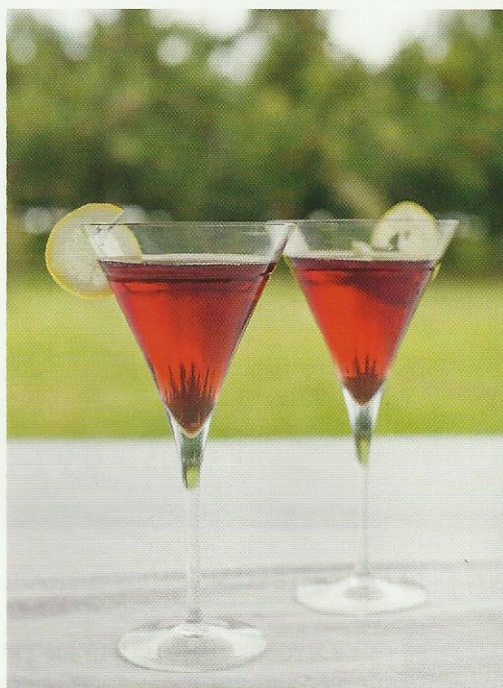
Harvest lunch for the damson pickers.



DAMSON MARTINI

60ml damson liqueur
30ml dry vermouth
ice
lemon

Place a cocktail glass in the freezer to chill. Combine the damson liqueur and vermouth in a shaker half filled with ice and shake vigorously until well chilled, about 20 seconds. Strain into the chilled glass. Run a slice of lemon over the rim of the glass then use as a garnish.



FRUITY FACTS

The damson plum is believed to have developed from a native plum of Damascus and is closely related to the sloe.

The trees grow quickly in Hawke's Bay's deep, rich, alluvial soil.

One fully laden tree can produce 2500 plums.

There are very few commercial damson plum orchards in Australasia.

Damson plum trees are now easier to buy than they were three years ago because of renewed interest in heritage fruit.

The Damson Collection range includes damson paste, jam, jelly, coulis, cordial, liqueur, terrine, chocolates (made by Wellington chocolatier Bohemein), vinaigrette and seasonal Christmas cakes and puddings.

The paste and jam have won Cuisine Artisan Awards.
thedamsoncollection.co.nz



DAMSON RICOTTA TART

If you're a keen cook you can make your own shortcrust pastry but using ready-made means prep time is only 5 minutes.

400g shortcrust pastry (1 pre-rolled sheet)
500g ricotta (normal or light)
½ cup sugar
2 eggs
zest of a lemon
180g The Damson Collection damson jam

Roll pastry to fit a 20cm round pie dish; trim the excess. In a bowl, combine ricotta, sugar, eggs and zest. Take the lid off the jam jar and heat in a microwave for 1 minute or until runnyish. Pour ricotta mixture into dish and spoon over jam. Bake on lowest shelf in the oven at 180°C for 45-50 minutes.