

Under the Hawke's Bay sun

By Rose Mannering

Margie Chambers stepped into a different world when she left behind a successful career in corporate business to become a plum grower on St Georges Rd near Hastings.

Margie, husband Tom and business partner Catherine Rusby run a boutique plum business, the Damson Collection. Damson liqueur, paste, jam, jelly, coulis, viniagrette and chocolates provide a taste sensation with no product released from Margie's kitchen until she is satisfied it will deliver something special.

And their work has paid off, with a win at this year's Cuisine Artisan Awards, for their damson jam.

Although the business is just small, great attention has been made to every detail and having distributed their products to gourmet retailers throughout New Zealand, they now have their eyes set off-shore.

The story of The Damson Collection begins with Tom, who was ready for a change after 20 years of orcharding in Hastings and decided to enrol at Victoria University to undertake a Bachelor of Political Science. As luck would have it, he moved into a flat with Margie. Romance blossomed, and the pair would spend some of their weekends back on the orchard, a break from city life which Margie relished.

For the past 10 years she worked as a business consultant or "troubleshooter" on projects such as the insurance merger for IAG of State and NZI. She has an MBA and had previously spent 15 years overseas working in London and Sydney.

Tom introduced Margie to Damson plums – he had an old hedgerow at the back of his orchard and had inherited some of his English family recipes for sloe gin and jam.

Damsons are a "good old-fashioned" plum. First records of it are from Damascus in ancient times, and it was introduced into England by the Romans. Eaten raw they are low in juice and sharp to the palette. Cooked, the fruit produces the richest plum flavour.

Margie was captivated by them, and a business idea began to form. They moved back to Hastings in February 2010, where the transition to country life has been a welcome change for Margie. The first big plus has been the weather: abundant sunshine – perfect for growing Damsons. She took over the cooking role for the Damson Collection, and Tom attends to growing the plums.

Most of the orchard is leased out, but one hectare has been retained and Tom has established 200 new Damson trees from cuttings, cultivated under a multi-leader growing system. He is considering getting a nurseryman to grow trees for him.

The trees are planted at a spacing of 4.5 x 2 metres. Trees planted in 2006 are now producing about 10kg a tree, and




Margie and Tom Chambers amongst the Damsons just before harvest.

>from previous

"We need to retain and develop our international connections to better understand the global market place and hopefully to collaborate in research. New Zealand is not a huge player on the avocado scene, and our research funding is very limited so the more we can share R&D and/or information with other countries the better. It is so important to ensure we are always seeking new innovation for the industry."

Jen is an avid consumer of avocados and regards them as a wonderful product. "I want to understand more about their health qualities and look at ways to increase consumer consumption at a

time when a global food shortage is predicted. The Japanese, for instance, are very conscious of the need for a healthy diet and we know that avocados are good for both our insides and outsides."

Jen and her husband Bob have returned to their 2.5ha rural property behind the Kaimai Primary School. Daughters Becky (17) and Molly (14) have been very supportive of the move back to the Bay of Plenty. "It is a far cry from our mid-city apartment overlooking the old spice markets in Hamburg and the frantic pace of life there... It was a shock, though, to find that we have to wait to be connected to broadband." 

older trees are double that. Fruit are thinned to avoid branches breaking, and like canning peaches, thinning is done by whacking the trees with a stick.

Although the trees are not produced under an organic production system, they have so far been "spray-free", with the small amounts of insect damage not above an economic threshold.

The couple is aware of one other Damson orchard in New Zealand, but on a trip to England to the Lye valley failed to locate anything other than unkempt hedgerows of the fruit.

Harvesting of the Damsons is in mid-February and Margie rents a commercial kitchen in Elwood Rd, Hastings, on a "time-share" basis. The kitchen becomes available at 6pm and Margie and her helpers move in and work until midnight producing their range of delectable products. No preservatives are needed, or used in the production of the Damson products as the fruit is naturally high in pectin.

Margie is happy to admit she is a perfectionist. Over a three-year period she has made a number of products but will only release one to the market if it is exceptional. She cooks and re-cooks and continually tweaks until she is satisfied she has got it right.

She gone through seven different recipes for plum sauce and believes she will soon be ready to launch. "The problem with the sauce is that vinegar and spices overpower the fruit flavour. I have got a recipe now with not a lot of other things in it."

Tom and Margie do not have marketing expertise, and around the same time Margie moved to Hawke's Bay, so did a business colleague and friend, Catherine Rusby. Originally from Canada, Catherine was the chief information officer for IAG insurance in Wellington but had decided to pursue her passion for wine and did a course at EIT. She now works for Trinity Hill, looking after marketing for the company as well as being Margie's business partner in the New Zealand Damson Company, the legal entity behind the Damson Collection.

Catherine makes the call when a product is ready to go to the market. Their first step is to take it to the farmers' markets in Hastings and Napier to get some valuable consumer feedback. They view the farmers' market as vital as a means to educate

their customers about the plums and their product. They also sell fresh Damsons at the market, and following an item on the BBC's The Edible Garden on how to make your own Damson vodka demand has been brisk.

Their website sums up their philosophical approach: "We wanted to work in a business that would allow us to represent our personal values in our business dealings. This starts with a sustainable approach to growing our fruit and extends into the kitchen where we ensure only quality ingredients are used. We don't need or want preservatives... so we don't use them. All our products are handmade with care and enthusiasm."

Catherine has looked after the branding, labeling and packaging for the business. She says they will always remain in the fine food sector, and they are not interested in supplying the supermarket trade. Growth for the business lies offshore: they plan to export to Australia and the UK.

No direct advertising has been undertaken, but their activities have attracted coverage from every major food-related magazine in New Zealand after sending free product to magazines and delicatessens. Their first point-of-display advertising will be a bookmark, in the form of a pad with pages that can be ripped off and taken home along with the product.

Margie and Catherine are serious about their business and its growth, but for them both there is the underlying motivation of a better lifestyle revolving around food and friends. Harvest time provides the perfect example of this, with friends coming from Australia to help pick. Margie cooks all of the helpers' lunch and dinner, and everybody relaxes at the end of the day with a beer or a gin and tonic. There is much hilarity emanating from under the boughs while the fruit is removed.

Tom says they have been "ruralified", and between them have a menagerie of dogs, cats, chooks. Instead of going out for dinner they trade, such as Cath's eggs for Margie's asparagus. "It gives us a lot of joy doing the simple things, I can't ever imagine going back to urban life," Margie says.

In time Margie would like to purchase another orchard block and establish the processing and packing facilities, as well as more Damsons, on that property.





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