

# Farmers' markets the plum part of job

An ancient, intensely flavoured plum is being revived by a Hawke's Bay trio with complementary skills. **Jon Morgan** reports.

**T**OM CHAMBERS loves to see what he calls the "chocolate face". It's when a browser at his farmers' market stall tries a chocolate filled with syrupy damson plum liqueur.

"You can't just take a bite or the syrup will dribble everywhere. You have to put it all in your mouth and then bite it," the Hastings grower says.

"Then the intense damson flavour explodes in their mouth and they get the chocolate face. They are lost in the moment – their eyes sparkle and a big grin spreads across their face. Seeing that is what makes my job worthwhile."

He is an owner, with wife Margie and their friend, Catherine Rusby, of The Damson Collection, a 3-year-old Hawke's Bay business making a variety of products from the 400 damson plum trees on their Hastings orchard.

The chocolates started as an off-shoot of their first product, bottled damson liqueur, Margie says.

"I couldn't bear the thought of throwing the plums away after making the liqueur. I tried them with chocolate and it was 'Wow! We have to do this!'"

A paste made from the small, blue-purple plums was the third product they tried and their success has been followed up with jelly, jam, vinaigrette, coulis and Christmas cakes and puddings.

A new treat will be launched with this season's harvest in February. It is a terrine, a sticky log-shaped melange of damson plums, walnuts and honey, which has already been judged a big hit by chef Terry Lowe of Havelock North's Black Barn restaurant.

Al Brown and Ray McVinnie are other well-known chefs who speak highly of the damson products of which two – the vinaigrette and coulis – were selected for the menu of a "pop-up" temporary restaurant set up in Melbourne last year to promote Wellington.

The three owners have complementary skills that have them determined not to go the way of many new small businesses that start with a roar but fade to a whimper after a few years.

Tom has been a Hawke's Bay orchardist for 30 years, Margie is a former high-flying corporate financial analyst and Catherine is an experienced marketer.

Tom and Margie met 10 years ago when Tom decided to take a break from apple-growing to do a political science degree at Victoria University.

Margie was his landlady. She was living in Wellington after spending 14 years in the corporate world – seven years as a financial modeller in London, crunching the numbers for mergers and acquisitions, and seven in Sydney, where she went to do a master of business administration degree and then helped global freight giant DHL through a big restructuring in Australia.

In Wellington, she worked for insurance company IAG NZ and headed up a merger between State and NZI. Catherine was IAG's chief information officer.

On a visit to Tom's three-hectare orchard near Hastings, Margie tried his homemade damson gin. It was a eureka moment. "It tasted fantastic, the flavour was so intense," she remembers.

"I said, 'We must do something with this.'" They planted more



**Taste test:** Tom and Margie Chambers sample their latest product, damson terrine – a sticky log-shaped melange of damson plums, walnuts and honey.

trees and planned carefully for a launch in 2009 with the gin, marketed as "liqueur", and quickly added the chocolates, teaming with Wellington maker Bohemein Fresh Chocolates.

Propelled by Catherine's marketing, which included label designs, product information, setting up a website and interesting food magazines in their story, sales at the farmers' market stall and online took off.

Then Margie, by now married to Tom, decided to take the plunge, by leaving Wellington and joining the business fulltime.

"Was it a gamble? Oh, total!" she says. "I was leaving behind big money, but it was now or never. We had done a lot of research and development and had an exciting range of new products lined up. The Hawke's Bay lifestyle was reasonably attractive too."

She investigated how viable the business could be, working out how many bottles of a product could be made in a commercial kitchen in an eight-hour day.

Margie is full of praise for Haw-

ke's Bay's innovative business environment. "People are willing to help you find your way, they want you to succeed."

An example is the help she has received from grower co-operative

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Tom Chambers



Fruitpackers, which did not charge for the initial experimental plum processing.

Harvesting in February each year has become a social occasion.

Five of Catherine's friends fly in from Sydney for the week.

"They're four girls – actually in their 40s and 50s – and one husband," Margie says. "They help with picking and processing, we all cook for each other and have a great time. They're all foodies, all involved in the corporate world and have good ideas to improve the business."

She says the "back end" of the business is most important. She and Catherine decided from the start to make it as easy as possible to buy off the website, with easily understood buying instructions.

The business system is simple, from batch recording to stock counts, she says.

"Our staff are shown a diagram of seven boxes containing the instructions for each product and are told: 'If you're doing something that is not to do with these boxes you shouldn't be doing it.'"

During its three years, the business has expanded, reaching milestones such as being taken on by Wellington foodies mecca Moore Wilson, New World supermarkets in Auckland and

delicatessens throughout the country, and winning Cuisine Artisan Awards.

However, the most satisfying sales remain those at their farmers' market stall, and at fairs around the North Island, including the National Fieldays.

"You can't beat that face-to-face contact with your customers," Tom says. "Tasting is the main promotion for us. It's where we test new products – people soon tell you whether they like them or not."

Seeing the "chocolate face" is one of his chief delights and so is an increasingly common experience of having locals bring visiting friends to them, saying "You've got to try this".

They also have The Tasting Table set up at the Red Barrel vineyard, on the edge of Havelock North, with wine matches – pastore, terrine-syrah – and vineyard picnics.

Exporting is in its infancy. A recent big order was for damson paste to go with cheeseboards sold at the Adelaide cricket ground.

They hear of people sending

their products to friends in Britain, Washington and Israel and know they will have to venture out into the world before long.

"It's a matter of choosing where to spend your dollars," Margie says. "We fund our growth from cashflow and we can only grow as that allows."

She is unsurprised by their success. "If you like food, then you will just rave about damsons. You never get tired of it – I put the jam on my toast every morning, we have the jelly every time we eat lamb."

However, she has had her moments of doubt.

"There are times when it seems like we're doing all this hard work for little return and I go 'What on earth are we doing', but it passes." Seeing the looks of wonder on the faces of customers is the best antidote.

"It's a magic moment," Tom says. "It's when the marketing hyperbole is matched by personal experience. That's the dream of everyone in business."

the damson collection.co.nz

## DAMSON PLUMS

Said to originate from Damascus in ancient times, they are small olive-sized plums with dark blue-purple skins and tart-tasting flesh. However, according to *Los Angeles Times* food writer David Karp, when cooked down "the astringency disappears and its tannic skin imparts a gorgeous magenta colour and rich, spicy flavour, while its abundant pectin confers a lusciously thick and smooth consistency".

**Fine fruit:** Damson plums have a blue-purple skin and an intense flavour.

