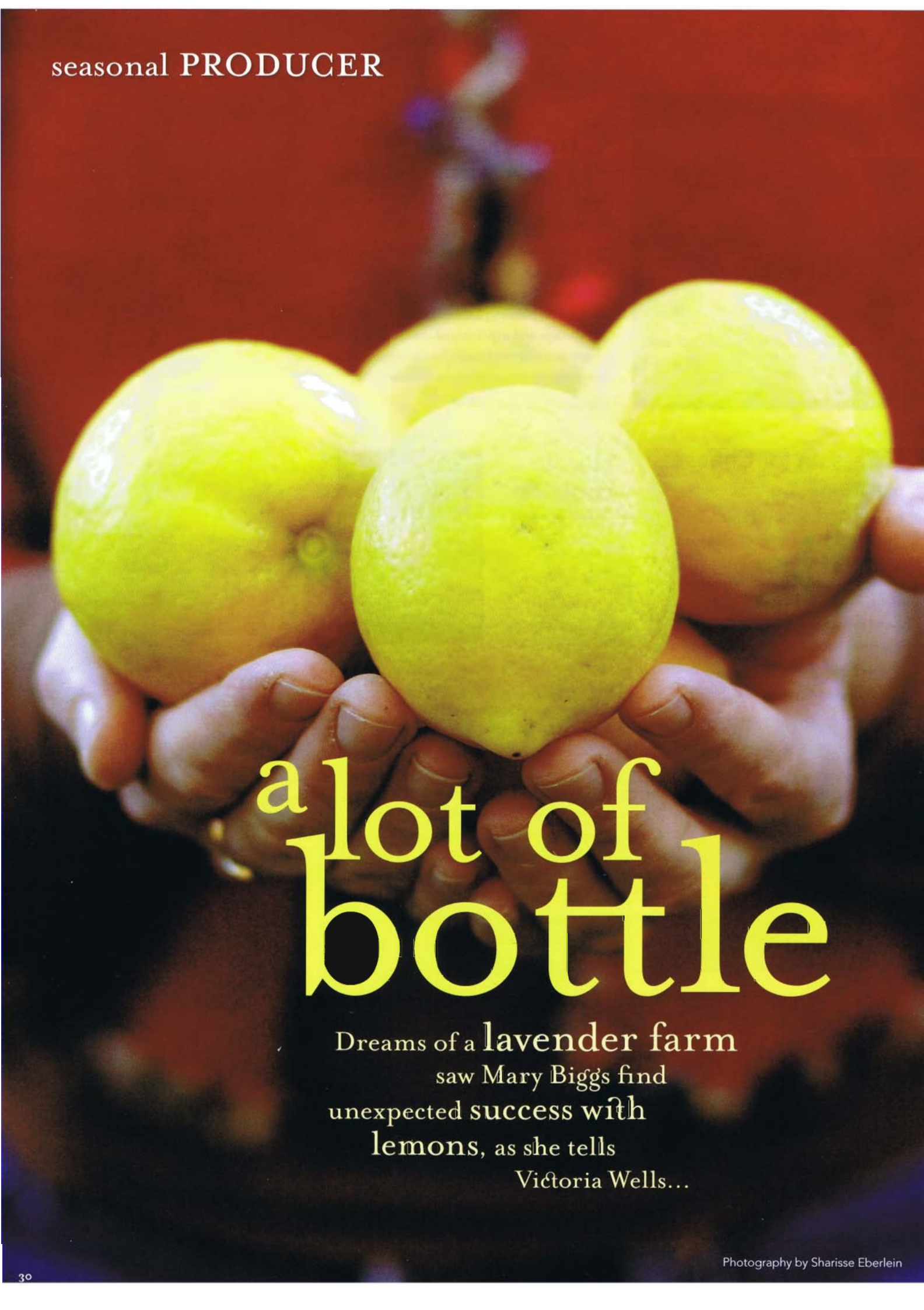


seasonal PRODUCER



# a lot of bottle

Dreams of a lavender farm  
saw Mary Biggs find  
unexpected success with  
lemons, as she tells  
Victoria Wells...

Photography by Sharisse Eberlein



**Mary Biggs** lives with her family in a 19th floor apartment overlooking central Melbourne, surrounded by the bustle and noise of big city living. But every few weeks she returns to her other home in Featherston – a place where free-range hens run amok through the lemon grove, ancient apple trees stand sentinel in the garden and Bess, the aged Labrador, suns herself on the porch of the historic homestead.

“It is a delightful home,” acknowledges Mary, “and I think one of the reasons why we wanted to do this business too was to share the beauty of the place.”

The business is Lavender’s Green, a boutique producer of top quality, spray-free lemon and herb-based products. It operates from Te Puhī, a beautiful property in Featherston, which dates from 1868 and is home to many of the ingredients used in the products: from the back porch you can see the rows of all important lemon trees and the hens which provide the fresh eggs, roaming about.

“The eggs are really important, those birds are free-range,” says Mary. “They have a really happy life those hens, they roam under cars, over decks. They’re very naughty and quite lucky to be alive! But we let them carry on because they’re part of the whole ethos of the products we make.”

The flagship Lavender’s Green products are the lemon and lime cordials, packaged in distinctive blue bottles. The range also includes lemon and lime curds, preserved lemons, a biscotti with lemon, ginger and nut, Russian fudge, onions pickled with Manuka honey, roast lemon chutney and a lemon lavender jelly.

The jelly is only available through the website, due to its ingredients. It is created from lavender grown on the property and crabapples, with their distinctive pink-tinged flesh, which are gathered as they drop from a tree believed to be more than 130 years old, which overhangs the driveway.

Te Puhī was home to Mary, her husband Peter Biggs (“Biggsy”) and their four children for nearly ten years before Biggsy’s work commitments saw them move to Melbourne at the end of last year. They’ll be there for at least another five years, although Mary’s regular trips back keep her in the loop of the company she built from the ground up.

Lavender’s Green came from small beginnings and was born out of Mary’s desire to lift some of the family’s financial pressures by downsizing from their home in Seatoun in the late 90s. She was a full-time mother, while Biggsy was in a high-pressure advertising job, which saw him spending four nights a week in Auckland.

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“I was aware we needed to change – break the cycle and do something different,” she says.

A ‘Be your own Boss’ course with the Wellington Chamber of Commerce crystallised a dream she had to grow organic lavender. Biggsy subsequently spotted an ad for the sale of Te Puhī and the pair headed to the Wairarapa.

“It was everything I’d ever dreamed of, right down to the fretwork on the house,” says Mary. “It was like a dream had come true. I think I made the decision to buy it within the first ten minutes and I hadn’t even got in the house, it was just walking around the garden!”

The family moved in 1997 and Mary and her husband set about planting thousands of trees and lavender plants. However, the reality of growing





the lavender coupled with raising her young family meant Mary soon realised she needed an interim plan to help finance the farm.

"I'd always known from school fairs and things that lemon cordial sold well, it was a very popular product and I've always liked blue glass.

"The label I drew myself... I had the children's ice cream containers full of pencils and crayons and I literally drew it while the kids were upstairs in the bath. I coloured it in and it just came from my head to the paper with no mistakes, just as you see it."

Her first bottles of lemon cordial were made in her kitchen, until a chance meeting with the food buyer at Kirkcaldie & Stains resulted in an order for 500 bottles for their Christmas baskets. It was the impetus Mary needed to find a commercial kitchen.

She started by hiring the local RSA commercial kitchen and enlisted help from other mothers she had met outside the school gates – several of whom are still involved with the company now. Locals were also happy to donate extra lemons from their gardens in return for cordial when the fruit from Te Puhi wasn't sufficient to meet demand.

Mary says there has always been a real sense of ownership from the community.

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"Mr Adamson, who owns the Mobil garage in town, he asked if he could sell the cordial, just because he was so chuffed that it was from Featherston. I thought that was delightful. Normally I don't put the cordial into petrol stations, but they put it up on the front counter, it's ideal!"

Since the company has grown further, a small commercial kitchen has been installed at Te Puhi. The kitchen works three days a week and everything is handmade in small batches. Bottling days are considered a highlight. A team of ten can bottle 4000 jars by hand in two days.

"It's very low tech – I have got a four head bottling machine out in the shed, but I figured we were actually quicker doing it by hand and it was

much more pleasant than using a machine that's quite noisy. We have a ball on the bottling days, we have a lovely lunch, a great morning tea and we have a really good chance to catch up and what-not."

The products are then shipped to selected stores around the country and to an outlet in Singapore.

Mary says she is thinking about launching the company in Melbourne, but is still very focused on getting her children through school and university. There are also thoughts around opening Te Puhi to the public and converting the original dairy into a shop.

However, for the moment her regular trips back to Featherston mean she can keep in touch with what's going on, and, most importantly, stock up on products.

"The Lemon Mustard is always a sandwich spread and goes in our mashed potatoes or on barbecued or roasted meats. I use the Roast Lemon Chutney when we have butter chicken, or it works really well with just cheese and crackers.

"When I'm cooking a chicken I use a whole preserved lemon inside the carcass instead of fresh, it gives a much fuller flavour. I also bake salmon or white fillet of fish with preserved lemons, chilli oil and fresh coriander."

Although Lavender's Green continues to grow, Mary is determined to retain the integrity of the products.

"What you see is what you get," she says. "And what you get is the best of what we can put in." •

For more information visit [www.lavendersgreen.co.nz](http://www.lavendersgreen.co.nz)

