

GOOD *taste*

At a squeeze

Searching for something to do and a little extra cash, Mary Biggs struck upon a simple idea. It turned out to be no lemon. By Sharon Stephenson

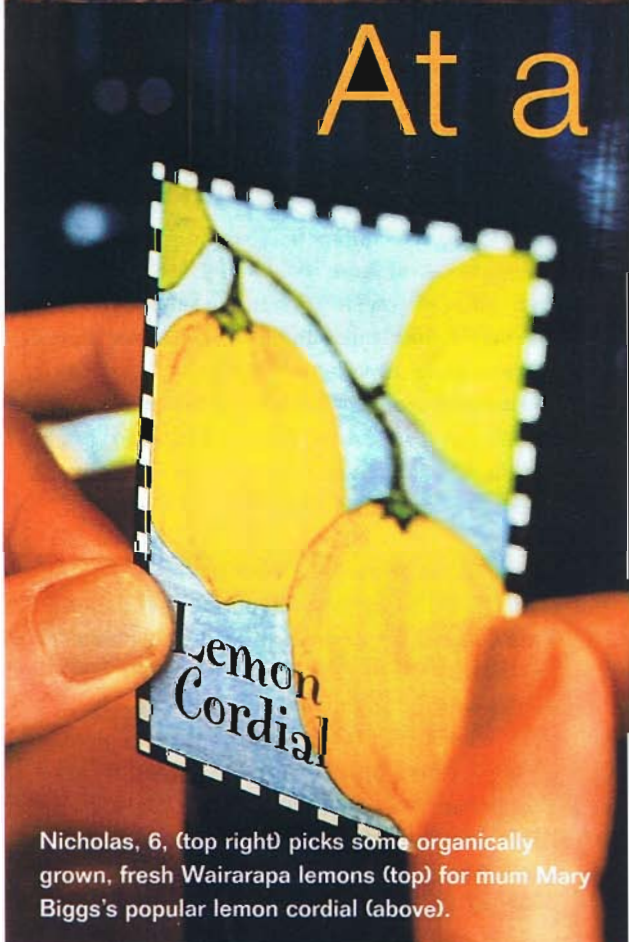
Take a humble lemon and turn it into a boutique beverage which is one of the hottest-selling items in London's chi chi Conran Shop. Now there's a challenge.

That a Wairarapa mother of four who didn't have a formal business plan achieved this, makes the feat even more astounding.

But spend time with the energetic Mary Biggs and you soon realise that anything – and everything – is possible.

"I believe that if you run your business with love, honesty and generosity then that goodness will come back and doors will open for you," says the 42-year-old.

As business philosophies go, that one's certainly on the 'touchy feely' end of the scale. But it's worked for Mary, and her distinctive blue-bottled cordial can now be found



Nicholas, 6, (top right) picks some organically grown, fresh Wairarapa lemons (top) for mum Mary Biggs's popular lemon cordial (above).



Mary Biggs's blue-bottled lemon cordial is made from fresh lemon juice, rind and citric acid, which is usually added to hot or cold water. She sources the lemons from neighbours in the South Wairarapa and from their own lemon grove.

in delicatessens, cafés and design stores around the country – and on the other side of the globe.

Made from fresh lemon juice, rind and citric acid, the concentrate is usually added to hot or cold water. It can also be used in cooking, as evidenced by the delicious lemon curd tarts with which Mary plies me during the interview. And, she adds with a wink, her cordial is increasingly finding favour with grownups who like it as a mixer with gin or vodka.

It's such a simple concept that the mother of Julia, 14, Ella, 12, Charlotte, 10, and Nicholas, 6, admits to being astounded by its success. Ask her to explain it, however, and she puts it down to tapping into the twin foodie trends of the new century – organics and products harking back to the simplicity of yesteryear.

"People think back to what food tasted like when they were growing up – and then look at the plastic-tasting products they're consuming today," says Mary. She adds that her mother made her the very same lemon cordial when she was a child.

Organics, she believes, is our only option.

"It's the most sensible thing we can do. The type of chemical farming we employ now doesn't respect the environment and we'll pay for that eventually. We need to ask ourselves what kind of earth we want our kids to inherit."

Mary's citrus odyssey began four years ago when she was left virtually a solo mother by husband Peter's job as head of the advertising agency Clemenger BBDO (Biggsy, as Peter is known, is now also the Chairman of Creative New Zealand). Home at the time was the

Wellington beachside suburb of Seatoun.

"Biggsy was spending most of the week in Auckland and I was left at home with four young kids. I decided I might as well be somewhere I really wanted to be if I was going to be on my own so much."

Her fate was sealed when Biggsy spied 'Te Puhi', a seven-hectare homestead near Featherston, advertised for sale in *The Dominion*.

But if moving to the country was serendipity, then falling into business was even more so.

"The two oldest girls were at boarding school and I knew I needed to find something to do once they were all at school," says Melbourne-born Mary.

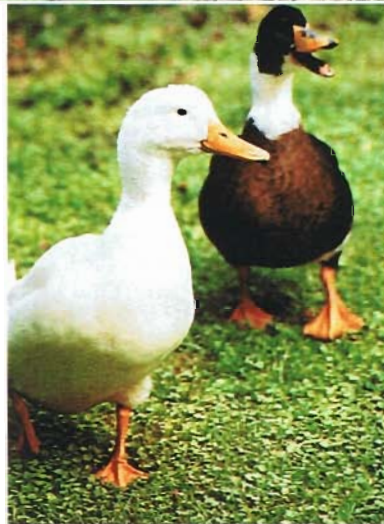
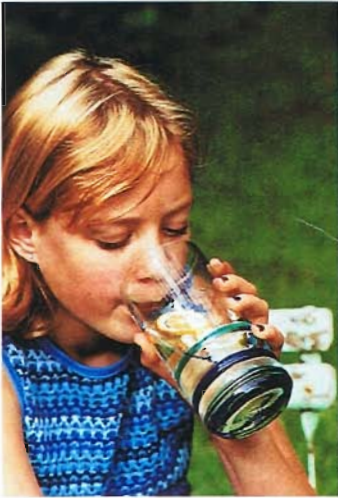
The Cordon Bleu-trained chef was making "pocket money" from catering for formal dinner parties for her husband's clients but what she really wanted to do was make an income from the land.

Having researched lavender farming, she planted 500 hardy 'Grosso' lavender plants.

But while she did most of the labour herself, the capital outlay wasn't cheap. Mary was adamant her lavender venture wouldn't become a drain on the family finances. An alternative source of funds was needed.

"I used to make lemon cordial using a friend's mother's recipe, giving it away to family and school fairs. It was always popular and I thought, why not see if it will sell?"

Initially, Mary used Te Puhi's own lemons and would peel, juice and bottle the cordial at her kitchen table. Her only equipment was a humble potato peeler, a domestic food processor and juicer and old sherry bottles.



Daughters Charlotte (above left) and Ella (far right) enjoy their mother's refreshing invention. Above: Te Puhī, the Biggs's country Wairarapa homestead – and some of its happy inhabitants (right).

The crunch came when her supply of pre-loved bottles came to an end. "I rang a bottle recycler in the Hawke's Bay, only to find his minimum order was 1000. I knew if I bought 1000 bottles, then I'd have to use them."

About that time, she was on her way to meet her bank manager when she stopped in to see a friend at Wellington department store, Kirkcaldie and Stains.

"My friend suggested I show the cordial to the store's food buyer which I did. She immediately ordered 500 bottles for their Christmas baskets."

With her output thus revved up, Mary knew she had to get serious about the production side of things and find a commercial kitchen. She asked around and found the Featherston RSA was willing to lease its kitchen during down times.

However, a casualty of the increased demand was Mary's tradition of bottling by hand.

"So I approached the Martinborough Wine Centre and they provided access to their equipment which allowed me to bottle in lots of 1300 at a time."

Which worked well until a chemist suggested that, for the sake of the wine, the lemon cordial should be kept separate from the wine-bottling equipment.

Just when it seemed Mary would have to throw in the towel, a friend came to her rescue by sourcing a four-head bottling machine. Mary then bought her own vat, designed and had the vibrant yellow labels printed and began production with a vengeance.

These days, Mary sources organically grown Meyer lemons from her neighbours in the South Wairarapa. "People ring me and I'll go and pick the lemons, and

exchange them for lemon cordial." Biggsy recently augmented Te Puhī's existing lemon grove with 100 more trees during a weekend visit (he lives in Wellington during the week).

Mary hasn't gone in for flash branding – the beverage is simply known as Lemon Cordial, by Lavender's Green Ltd. And, despite having a husband in the business, she has never advertised it, preferring to let the news travel by word-of-mouth.

"As Chairman of Creative NZ, Biggsy gets to travel to many functions around the country. When I can get away, I use air-miles to go with him. While there, I'll walk around town and go into cafés and delis to give them a sample."

She's only ever had one knock-back, and even that person rang her recently to ask if he could stock the cordial. However it was while on a visit to London earlier this year that Mary really struck pay dirt.

"I had my fortune read by a gypsy. She told me that my business would be successful and that I would write a cookbook."

Later that day, Mary happened to call into the Conran Shop in London's Kings Road and before she knew it, she

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was discussing the logistics of wowing the Brits with her golden tippie.

"I'm not sure if the two events are related, but I was certainly glad to have run into that gypsy," laughs Mary.

The mysterious psychic also came

Be they food, wine, fashion, literature or the arts, we're an amazingly creative nation and we really do live in paradise. All we need to do is celebrate, appreciate and promote that!"

There's no doubt luck has been a

eat or talk for a while."

Although doctors said her paralysis would eventually disappear, traces of it still remain. However, Mary says she's refused to be a victim or allow it to hold her back.

"It strengthened me as a person because I realised that it's not how you look on the outside that matters, it's what you're like inside. And what matters to me is raising a happy and healthy family and running an honest, ethical business."

And having a heap of fun doing it, she adds. "My life is far too busy for any part of it to be unhappy or unsuccessful!"

And so what started simply as a cash-flow exercise has evolved into a successful business. It's not so surprising if, like Mary, you subscribe to the John Lennon philosophy that 'life is what happens when you're busy making other plans'. ☐

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through with her second prediction, as one of Mary's future projects is to compile a lemon recipe book.

Next on Mary's hit list is Australia and she's planning to visit her old hometown of Melbourne first.

"I find doing this kind of development work incredibly challenging because it constantly confirms for me how sought-after products from New Zealand are.

frequent visitor to her life, but Mary admits to her fair share of hardship. Like the brush with mortality, which left her face partly paralysed.

"I was 36 weeks pregnant with Charlotte when I developed shingles in my ear. Of course I couldn't take the steroid treatment because I was pregnant, so the right side of my face became paralysed and I couldn't