

Mad about Mary...

Top chef, cookbook writer and TV personality Al Brown recently visited Mary and the team at Lavender's Green while shooting his latest series Get Fresh. In the series, he visits farmer's markets and country producers of fine food, cooking up a storm in the cab of his battered Hilux – complete with built-in kitchen. Lavender's Green will feature this season.

Al joins a throng of Kiwi chefs who choose Mary's lemon-based pantry-products over others – the preserved lemons in particular. Recently chef-patron (and multiple winner in Cuisine Magazine's Restaurant of the Year) Mark Limacher, of Wellington's stunning Ortega Fish Shack, named her preserved lemon in a Middle East inspired couscous and date salad.

In fact it is not only our leading chefs buying preserved lemons, Lavender's Green had record-breaking sales of the gourmet product over summer – a time when fresh lemons are in plentiful supply. It appears to be the fastest growing must-have pantry item in Lavender's Green's extensive range which has led to a very strong year for them in New Zealand. Business has strengthened considerably in Australia too. Their cordials are sold through David Jones stores and their curds, chutneys and lemons to a network of upmarket organic artisan stores. They recently had enquires from Japan and the US market is firmly on the horizon.

Mary likens the impact of using preserved lemons to that of whether you use salt or not – they make such a difference to the dish. She recommends their use when you are after a real 'hit' of lemon, salt and spice. And as for why the chefs use Mary's over the others? Hers are organic, juicy and preserved the day they are picked. Handled gently and therefore blemish free, they are immediately immersed in a spice-rich salt brew that will keep them perfect for years.

Most commonly associated with North African cuisine – and Moroccan in particular – preserved lemons have in fact been used all over the world. A delightful discovery of a 221-year-old recipe was particularly interesting. Elizabeth Raffald (an English housekeeper and cook) published "The Experienced Housekeeper. For the use and ease of ladies, housekeeper, cooks etc. Written purely from practice" in 1782 it was dedicated to her mistress, the Honourable Lady Elizabeth Warburton. In the early chapters she features preserved lemons made with ingredients similar to those in today's recipes. The method, however, would make your toes curl.

Cambodian, Indian, North African and Moroccan cuisine features heavily when searching for recipes that include preserved lemon. They are all delicious, if not a tad long in the ingredient list – especially for a has-to-be-fewer-than-10-ingredients cook like me. There is also the danger that a gourmet item is purchased,

Chefs prefer Lavender's Green

It seems our top chefs are mad about Mary.

Her preserved lemons in particular.

Julie Kidd discovers their magic.

used in a special occasion dish, and then never used again. A tragic waste. Noting this sensitivity, Mary has produced a 'how to use' card. It is brilliant. Simple, everyday uses – in the cavity of a chicken before you roast it (imagine the gravy, oh yum) or as part of the stuffing for the chicken or turkey. Even more simply, finely diced and mixed through mashed potatoes. (Go to her website at

www.lavendersgreen.co.nz to join her recipe club and find out more). So there is no reason for your gourmet purchase to languish in the fridge door after that one extravagant use.

However, it is Lavender's Green's recipe for a family favourite – Kedgeree – that wins this household over and keeps us well stocked in preserved lemons. Kedgeree started life in India, as a dish of lentils and rice, and then translated into the kitchens of English colonials at the time of the Raj to become an eggy, golden pile of lightly curried rice punctuated with slabby chunks of smoked fish. For brunch on a cool autumn Sunday, it is sublime. Mary generously shares her recipes with her customers and I am delighted to share her recipe with you now. Super simple – our 12-year-old son made it recently. The preserved lemon takes it to whole new level. A gorgeous Wairarapa Riesling complements the subtle lemon taste perfectly.

I am sure Al and Mark and all the other chefs would agree. Break out the

gourmet condiments and use them willingly and lovingly, every day. Bon appetite.

Lavender's Green Speedy Kedgeree

Serves 4. Doubles easily.

Finely chop 2 small leeks, 3 stalks of celery, 1 clove of garlic and 1 long, thin green deseeded chilli. Gently sweat all of this in 1 tablespoon of oil in large covered saucepan – about 5 to 10 minutes.

When soft, but not coloured, add 2 teaspoons curry powder and 1 teaspoon turmeric. Stir through and cook another minute then add juice of 1 lemon.

Cook 1 cup of Basmati rice. Add 1 finely chopped Lavender's Green Preserved Lemon (skin only, discard pulp) and stir through along with 1 small bunch of coriander.

Flake 1 fillet of smoked Hoki into the saucepan with leeks, then stir rice into fish and leek mixture. Mix lightly but well. Add 1 cup oven dried tomatoes seasoned with basil and garlic (this is optional).

To serve: Pile kedgeree onto plates. Add chopped hard boiled free range eggs – 1 per person. Serve with extra chopped parsley, basil, coriander to taste.



Mary with son Nicolas.