

Call me Dr Marmalade

BY LARA MCKINLEY

A WONGA Park man has won two gold medals and a silver at the world marmalade championships in the United Kingdom.

It's a record-winning haul for an Australian company. After all, winning a marmalade contest in England is a bit like winning a pasta contest in Italy: there's centuries of tradition and national pride to contend with.

"It's a pretty big deal, I just couldn't believe it," says Dr Lachlan Shackleton-Fergus, who runs his marmalade business J.B. Shackleton's, out of his home in Wonga Park.

But Lachlan has a secret weapon – he is from an old marmalade making family, and has two centuries of his own traditions and recipes to draw from.

Lachlan's business J.B. Shackleton's started out in Yorkshire in the late 1700s, then moved to Glasgow and onto London, before the original J.B (John Barstow) Shackleton set up shop in Melbourne in 1880 at the Eastern market.

"I remember my grandmother Alice Mary making deliveries in her horse and cart. She'd tie the horses to the lamp-posts. She was still at it when she was in her 80s."

The prize-winning preserves – old-fashioned tangelo, Tahitian lime and Cara Cara breakfast – were based on family recipes at least 150 years old, but using modern fruit varieties. "The recipes have been handed down through our family for more than five generations," Lachlan says.

Even the pans the marmalades are made in – five kilos of fruit is all they can handle – are family heirlooms, virtually impossible to buy now.

"We use the traditional 'open pan' technique," Lachlan explains. "The pots are thick and transfer the heat evenly."

"We do it all by hand. There's a real technique to it; a lot of skill in doing it accurately and consistently.

"The setting temperature has to be just right. If you don't get it right, the marmalade is like glue. It's a very, very precise process."

But there was no whiff of marmalade glue for the judges at the World's Original Marmalade Awards in Cumbria, England this year.

The tangelo was "magnificent with an excellent, complex flavour," according to judges. The lime was also "excellent, with a beautiful green colour; an even distribution of peel".

No improvements were needed, the judges said. What they didn't say is these preserves taste like a bit of colonial sunshine, having a dance on your tastebuds.

They are that good.

These are not the first awards Lachlan has won with his marmalade, but this is his first double-barrelled gold medal haul from a global field of 2300.

And that's where his second secret weapon came in: top quality, Australian fruit.

"The trick is to start with the finest quality fruit, absolute A-grade. It's a myth you can buy the cheap stuff. It just muddies the product," he says. "I only deal direct with the growers.



Lachlan Shackleton-Fergus shows marmalade judge Jane Hasell-McCosh his products and kitchen. Photo: Hermione Hasell-McLosh. Recipe for marmalade success (bottom right): use the family's 150-year-old copper pots to make small batches, by hand.

Marmalade in the blood (bottom left): the original J.B. Shackleton's stall at the Eastern market.

And I get the fruit ready and sliced within a week of getting it picked.

"For lime and cumquats I do it the day after it's picked, otherwise you lose the pectin."

Lachlan says he came to the family business later in life and is rather proud to have resurrected the tradition – although he has taken a rather tangled path to get there.

"When my grandmother died in 1966, that was the last time we were producing and selling marmalade in Australia."

His family moved to Gozo, a tiny island in the Mediterranean in the late 1960s and set about rebuilding a 400-year-old farmhouse surrounded by ancient olive trees.

But marmalade making was in the blood. "We planted hundreds of fruit trees in formerly barren areas," he

said.

"There was beautiful citrus on the island but no tradition of doing anything with it, no culture of making marmalade.

"The preserves soon became very popular, and are still made today."

The move was prompted by his father's career as part of the diplomatic corp. Lachlan, who was in his early 20s at the time, eventually moved to Cambridge and earned a PhD in international law. He went on to work as a consultant on multi-billion dollar tenders.

But eventually, Australia called him home and he set up shop in Wonga Park with his wife, children's book author Julia McClelland.

When he couldn't find marmalade he liked, he dug out those family recipes and pots, built a new kitchen,

made friends with local orchardists and started cooking.

He's not sure how much longer he'll keep the business going; at 69 he is thinking about retirement. Like his marmalade, it's bittersweet.

"We are the last of our line. It would be nice to pass it on, but perhaps it doesn't appeal to young people as a way of life."

He says it's not rocket science, but that it does take a lot of craft and skill. He does, however, admit with the Dr in front of his name and a bunch of letters behind it, his qualifications might be overkill.

He chuckles: "Oh well, just call me Dr Marmalade."

J.B. Shackleton's marmalades and jams can be bought from Warrandyte's very own *Lollies and Treats*, on Yarra Street.