

Business partners Vicki Martin, holding son Jackson, and Jenny Garing



SPICE GIRLS

Jenny Garing and Vicki Martin take the bump and grind of producing exotic gourmet food in their stride

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On a trip to Korea Jenny Garing brought back a hefty 20kg granite spice grinder in her luggage, leaving precious little room for anything else. But the sacrifice was worth it as the traditional grinder is an essential tool for the gourmet spice blends Jenny creates with business partner Vicki Martin.

The pair run Ground and, true to the name and the company's mortar and pestle logo, their products are all ground by hand in a converted sleep-out behind Jenny's Christchurch home.

Many commercial food premises are stuck away in dingy industrial areas amid acres of asphalt, but this one has views of Lyttelton Harbour and French

doors opening to a small courtyard.

When they need a break from filling jars with Middle Eastern goodies such as za'atar, berbere, dukkah, baharat and ras el-hanout, Vicki and Jenny have coffee in the garden which overlooks the port and watch tui sip nectar from the flax bush flowers. Paperwork is often done at the kitchen table, rather than in a downstairs office, so they can enjoy the view and the bird life with Vicki's one-year-old son Jackson and Jenny's dog Sky.

The only downside to this idyllic setting is that the steep section has no vehicle access, so couriers delivering heavy boxes of ingredients and jars often refuse to climb the 57 steps to the Ground kitchen. Vicki and Jenny keep fit by lugging stuff up and down the hill – a bit of a problem when Vicki was heavily pregnant.

Although the pair had no previous experience in the food industry, both had mothers who were adventurous cooks. Back in the '70s, when other families ate meat and three veg, their mums served up Chinese banquets.

Vicki says young Jackson appears to have inherited those adventurous tastes. "He has tried all the spice blends and pestos and hasn't blinked an eye yet. I'm just a bit terrified he's going to turn into one of those toddlers who decides not to eat anything!"

Jenny's background is in marketing. She taught English as a second language in China, Japan and Australia and still has a small business training language teachers. She and Australian Vicki met

in Queensland when Vicki, a social science researcher, was working on a Great Barrier Reef project with Jenny's husband Graeme Inglis, a marine biologist. Vicki came to New Zealand on her OE, met furniture designer husband Steve, and stayed.

Ground was born out of frustration when the two keen cooks had difficulty finding unusual ingredients and began experimenting with homemade spice mixes. "We'd have dinner parties and friends would say, 'You should go into business selling this'," Jenny says. "Our reaction was to say, 'Ha, ha, ha,' because we both had full-time, well-paid jobs."

Nevertheless the idea of going commercial took root and the pair finally took the plunge in October 2004. "We had some big garden party-type tastings with 30 or 40 people. We catered for my brother's birthday and made different dishes using each product. There was a wide cross section of people from real foodies to complete non-foodies and everybody loved it."

Part of their philosophy is to stick closely to traditional recipes. Although they try to use as many locally grown organic ingredients as possible, they import za'atar thyme from the Middle East because it tastes quite different to the locally grown herb.

They also opted to take on the muscle-building challenge of grinding whole spices by hand. "We'd have made it a lot easier for ourselves if we'd bought ready-ground spices, but you have no way of

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jenny's layered salad serves 4

potato layer

4 medium potatoes

2 Tbsp za'atar

2 Tbsp olive oil

fish layer

3 Tbsp za'atar

3 Tbsp fine cornmeal

6 fish fillets (about 200g each), each cut into four pieces

2 Tbsp olive oil

salad layer

6 large tomatoes, sliced

350g baby salad leaves

Lemon oil

200g rocket

12 green olives

1 Cut the potatoes into fairly thick slices and parboil or microwave for five minutes. Drain well and toss in za'atar to coat.

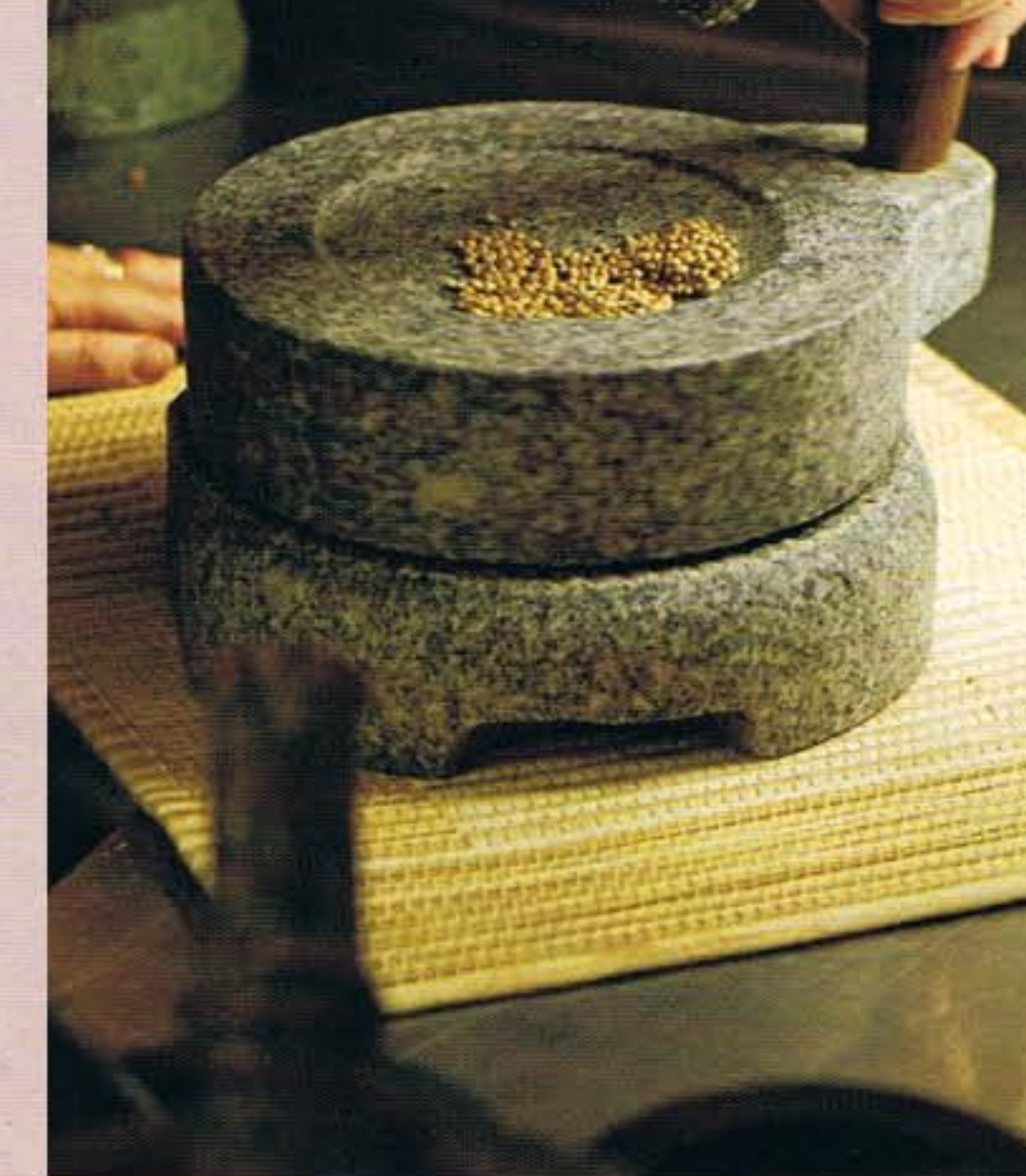
2 Heat olive oil in a frying pan and spread potatoes over the base of the pan. Cook in batches until tender and golden, turning once during cooking. Rest on a paper towel.

3 Mix za'atar with cornmeal and rub over fish fillets to coat.

4 Fry fish fillets in olive oil, then rest on paper towels.

5 Spread a layer of potatoes on a serving platter and cover with tomato slices. Top with salad leaves and drizzle with a little lemon oil. Place fish fillets on salad leaves and spread with rocket. Scatter olives over the top and drizzle with lemon oil.

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knowing how fresh they are," says Jenny. She adds that hand grinding results in a better flavour as the oils released don't go rancid so quickly and it's much easier to control the texture of products such as dukkah.

Their most popular product is toum, a lighter, fluffier Middle Eastern version of aioli that is served with fish or chicken, or as a replacement for mayonnaise. Jenny says it is highly addictive. "I was overseas for a month and my husband emailed me saying he had TDS – toum deprivation syndrome!"

Because toum does not contain egg to act as an emulsifier, it is very tricky to make. "If you get it wrong it turns into this watery liquid, and you don't know if it's going to work until the last minute. If it doesn't it's a very expensive waste because we use organic lemons and garlic. We have this joke that the stars have to be right and you have to be wearing the right clothes. We think it's all to do with the temperature of the oil."

The Ground range also includes spezie (pronounced spet-see-ay) which means 'spices' in Italian. The mix of pistachios, wild Sicilian oregano, cinnamon, poppy seeds and chilli is served like dukkah with bread and olive oil, or sprinkled over salads and pizzas. Customers have been known to scoff it by the spoonful.

Ethiopian spice mix berbere is Vicki's favourite. "I use it mostly on meats as

a rub. It's really good with venison, or rubbed on a chicken before roasting it, and it makes the best potato wedges."

Jenny confesses to mixing berbere with butter and eating it on toast for breakfast. "The flavour is great even though that's not what it was intended for at all."

Her grandmother has also found an unorthodox use for their walnut and pomegranate salsa, normally served on oily fish like salmon. "She puts it on her ice cream, ignoring the fact that it has red

they love membrillo, a quince paste from Spain. Vicki says it has to simmer for a long time and it's a very explosive process. "Because it splatters you have to wear gloves so it doesn't burn your skin."

Jenny proudly tells me a friend with a tapas bar in Barcelona claims Ground membrillo is better than Spanish brands. "There, it is served with sharp sheep milk cheese. We use it as a fruity glaze on pork and we have a recipe where it is used in a tart made with ground almonds."

66 Jenny and Vicki are enormously grateful for the support of their husbands – even if they do jokingly refer to them as the Spice Girls 99

onion and coriander in it."

Vicki is a big fan of the Australian move back to bush tucker, which uses indigenous ingredients such as lemon myrtle and wattle seeds, and says they have attempted to come up with some truly Pacific flavours. Ground's Pounamu Dukkah, combining macadamia nuts with dried kawakawa leaves, reflects their New Zealand and Australian backgrounds. Kawakawa has a slightly minty, eucalyptus taste, and was used by Maori to aid digestion and circulation. They're also planning a Pacific rub featuring native horopito (pepper tree) leaves and karengo (dried seaweed).

Although the two prefer savoury food,

The business now employs two part-time staff and there are plans to eventually set up a small shop in Lyttelton. Ground has a stall at the weekly Lyttelton Farmers' Market, also selling through delicatessens and over the internet. The Ground website offers a range of spice mixes, pastes, sauces and preserves. It also caters for cooks seeking hard-to-source ingredients such as ajowan seeds, cassia bark, kawakawa flakes, sumac and whole star anise.

Establishing Ground has been hard work and Jenny and Vicki say they're enormously grateful for the support of their husbands – even if they do jokingly refer to them as the Spice Girls. ☐