



# Preserving history

Laura Cartledge lifts the lid on The Loft Pickles and Jams. *Pictures by Liz Pearce*

**F**or The Loft Pickles and Jams being a cottage industry is not just about location – it's the key inspiration.

Owned by Sarah Thomas and husband Jason, their 1840 home in Washington is certainly at the heart of the business.

"It all started because we moved here and

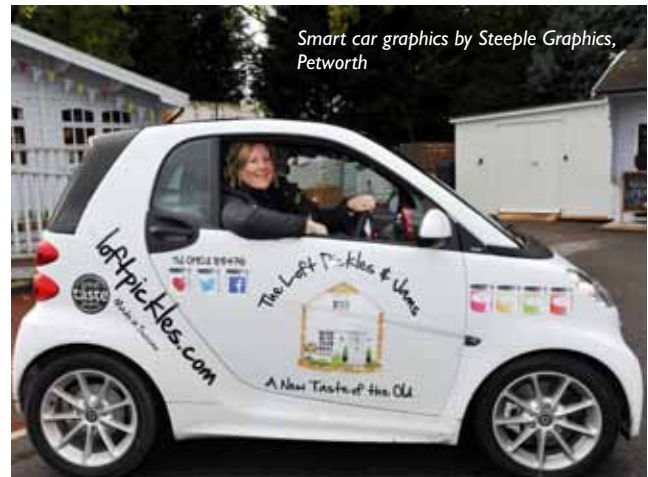
got told about the history," explains Sarah. "The previous family had lived here for 50 years and loved making jams, pickles and chutneys. It is all about living in the country I think, people who come to visit like home produced things."

Knowing this was the only encouragement the couple needed and teamed with their own expertise it seems a case of "meant to be".

"My husband and I both have catering backgrounds and it is very much a family business," reveals Sarah. "Our first Christmas we made lots of presents and things for people and that's how it developed. We launched in 2009 and are now stocked across Sussex."

What is created at The Loft is far from ordinary.

Illustrations on the jars have been created by Spotty Pig



Smart car graphics by Steeple Graphics, Petworth



Not only has this year seen it gain three more Great Taste Awards, to go along with two from 2012, there is a real sense of thinking outside the jar:

For example, if I said marmalade you might say orange, whereas The Loft might suggest Pink Grapefruit.

While, before meeting Sarah, if someone had said pickle I might whisper "Branston's?"

Now my mind has been opened to the likes of rhubarb and fig, beetroot and orange or The Loft's bestseller Sussex Chutney.

Whatever the flavour there is no doubt each is made with care, attention and passion.

"We do the old method which is the open pan method - making small batches of 24," says Sarah. "Plus we buy local as much as we can. A lot comes from Village Larder and local farms.

"People also leave things on our doorstep, apples and rhubarb, it is village life," she smiles.

"I wasn't used to that but it is lovely. One of our neighbours loves plum jam and they give us all the plums off their tree."

In return they receive a year's supply which sounds like a tasty deal to me.

This local service is clearly important to Sarah.

"That is what is different about us," she reveals. "We don't just deliver, we stop and have a cup of tea.

"We have people who come to buy a year's supply of their favourites, but because things are seasonal once we sell out that is it," explains Sarah. "As things come into season we make our specials. The sweet tomato and chilli did well this year. We used Nutbourne tomatoes and you could see all the different colours in the jar."

Inspiration comes primarily from the seasons and the local area and has ranged from a spiced apricot chutney - which came about from a collaboration with Highdown Vineyard - to making strawberry and pink champagne jars as wedding favours.

Then there is the unusual tayberry jam.

"It is between a raspberry and a blackberry with a bit of a perfume taste to it," explains Sarah. "Nobody was picking them because they didn't know what they were and they would have just gone to waste.

"The business has developed very naturally," she adds. "We are never going to be big, we don't want to be big. We want to

offer a personal service and a great product - we want to enjoy it."

The desire to pass this enjoyment on to others means there is talk of recipe cards being produced in the near future, but for now the build up to Christmas means The Loft is a hive of activity.

"It's a different pace to my previous job which was in sales," admits Sarah. "At first when we moved here I was not sure what I was going to do - now I have a jelly day, a jam day and a chutney day.

"It has been smelling very Christmassy in here recently," Sarah adds. "We make 1,200 jars of our Christmas Chutney and a lot of prep goes into it - which is where my husband comes in as he is quicker with a knife than I am."

However I doubt many people could boast a labels-on-jars speed which beats Sarah's "I can do 100 in 15 minutes," she smiles, "I've got it down to a fine art."

To find out more about The Loft Pickles and Jams and where to buy the products, call 01903 891476, 07752 364832 or visit [www.loftpickles.com](http://www.loftpickles.com)