



Well preserved

In some traditions, it's said you shouldn't cook if you or those around you are angry, and that one should put love into the food as it's being prepared.

Some even set aside a moment to say a little prayer in the kitchen before they begin a recipe.

My sense is that Jane Steward, managing director of Eastgate Larder, gives thanks every time she steps into her jam making kitchen in her home in Norfolk, UK. Similarly, when she trudges through the surrounding fields to check her orchard of medlar trees.

"Cul de chien," declares Steward with confidence and satisfaction. "Yes, a dog's bottom: That's what the medlar fruit is called in French."

This somewhat unattractive fruit does indeed resemble a cross between a burnished rosehip and a pinched anus.

The medlar, a distant relative of the apple, tastes both sweet and astringent. It can be traced back to ancient Babylonian times, and it's thought that the Romans brought it to Britain.

Knowing what to do with a medlar is not straightforward, explains Steward.

"You can't pick a medlar fruit off the tree and eat it," she says. "After harvesting, medlars must be left to soften (or blett), almost to the point where they look ready for the compost heap." She must judge carefully when the time is right to begin jam making.

Her kitchen has four hobs, each simultaneously simmering large pans of syrupy medlar fruit and sugar mixture. As she stirs, Steward clocks the changing of the seasons outside.

Medlars are not just a business for her, but a meditation. Her jellies and fruit cheeses, which go with cheese and cold

It's coming up to 'bletting' season – a process of softening fruits such as medlars. It's a process Jane Steward is very familiar with, having moved from banking to executive coaching to jam making. But she still makes Time to Think®. Rachel Ellison MBE reports

meats and her syrups, for pouring over hot, steaming porridge, are a way of connecting with the land she believes may have saved her life.

Shortly after moving to Norfolk, having exchanged corporate life in London, first as a banker, then as an executive leadership coach, for a rural base instead, Steward was diagnosed with stage 1 bowel cancer. The disease was caught early and treated swiftly. It was a huge shock.

The experience sent Steward "inwards". The mother of three and grandmother of four, withdrew to her medlar kitchen:

"Making medlar jelly was therapy for me. It energises me; I feel creative," she says. "I love the journey of starting with a heap of ingredients and ending up with a batch of beautiful, natural, elegantly packaged jars of jelly."

Steward began with 10 trees. When she decided to turn her hobby into a business, she and her husband David, planted a hundred more. Despite the official pause in her executive leadership coaching practice, Steward consciously deploys her coaching skills, building collaborative relationships with local farmers, suppliers and shopkeepers who stock her products.

While she no longer coaches business leaders, she's kept up her coaching CPD, namely Nancy Kline's Time to Think® programme.



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I asked her what connection she sees between her former coaching career and her medlar business. She says tending her trees and judging when medlars are ripe, is a GROW model in action:

“The Goal is the yield,” explains Steward. “The Reality is water supply, the weather, my irrigation system, my observations of whether the fruit looks dry. I harvested 3kg of fruit from one tree, but I wanted 4kg.”

She continues: “The Options include pruning, adding mulch or giving the trees extra water. What action I take in the critical early summer months, determines how things will look at harvest in October and how much fruit I have softening on trays in November.”

The ‘W’ [ie, the ‘What by When?’ or ‘Wrap-up’ of the GROW model], is a constant review of the goal, the reality, the options: “I keep checking the trees, the fruit, the conditions. But most importantly, I am among and with my trees, just as coaches are with their clients. I am tuning in. Being still. Being

fully present and at ease with and connected to nature.”

Says Steward: “I am now so much more aware of light, the prevalence of pollinating insects like the honey bee, of environmental waste, of local impact – be that the weather or local economy. I reflect on our interdependence. Of how the medlar jelly I make does not usurp, but complements the energy, dedication and produce of others.”

This year, her company, Eastgate Larder, produced and sold 4,500 jars of medlar jelly, medlar cheese and medlar syrup. Emerging for Steward is not only how her experience of working in international finance and executive leadership coaching enhances her ability to start up and run her medlar business, but what this business is teaching her, as reflective practitioner:

“I’ve learned about time, patience and sustainability. When I’m stirring, it is mindful stirring. There is a rhythm. The process of making medlar jelly cannot be rushed. The medlars must be washed, squeezed, simmered, pulped and the

juices strained. I must judge when the fruit is ready.”

She continues: “I must observe carefully when the jelly is at the right stage to set. I’m highly present to what is going on in the pan. I attend to the intensity of the bubbles as the mixture cooks. You cannot achieve the same product in a pressure cooker.”

I like the intention behind slowly stirring over using high-speed gadgets. I see the pressure cooker point as a metaphor for quick-fix business coaching, rapid apps or for tools and tests which are sold to clients who need, above all, to feel heard.

Clients given two or three coaching sessions, with coaches who try to achieve the same results as when working with someone for a year, resembles a ‘hurry up and think’ approach to leadership development. What chance is there for the client’s thinking to unfurl and unfold?

Perhaps the manic C-suite executive or their sometimes harried coach, might take a moment to set a different rhythm in the conversation. To stir ideas around mindfully. To carefully observe oneself and others, without rushing. To tune into the intensity of the bubbling... **C**

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