

# In a charity-helping, eco-friendly way: That's how the mobile cookie factory rumbles

The Gay Village on a Saturday night is noisy, colourful, vibrant – and really no place for a bland, monochromatic dullard such as myself.

I was there at the invitation of fellow suburbanite Michael Eskenazi, who wanted to show off his new toy Urgence-Biscuits has been on the road since May, and the mobile cookie factory's latest stop was the corner of Ste. Catherine and Wolfe Sts.

As disco – the music that never died in this part of town – pounded out of Café Mado, Eskenazi served freshly baked cookies to revellers on their way east to watch the fireworks or on their way across the street to watch transvestite entertainers.

"You missed a funny scene earlier," Eskenazi said. "Someone was looking at my sign, deciding what kind of cookies to get, and another guy asked him if he wanted to buy some crack."

"He says, 'No, I want cookies, not crack.' Then they got into a big argument."

Has a 52-year-old married father of two – dressed less flamboyantly than his clientele, in the full Baie d'Urfé: polo shirt, khaki shorts, boat shoes with no socks – come to the Village to sow discord among the denizens?

Not at all. Eskenazi was putting in a long workday – noon



**MIKE BOONE**  
on Urgence-Biscuits

*"Revellers were on their way to watch the fireworks or to watch transvestite entertainers."*

to midnight – in a hot mobile kitchen to create some awareness of a brand that's been buzzless for awhile: Monsieur Félix and Mr. Norton.

Perhaps you remember the late 1980s? Eskenazi, a corporate guy who liked to bake, parlayed his own cookie recipe – using lots of butter and palate-pleasing ingredients such as Belgian chocolate and macadamia nuts – into a chain of Monsieur Félix and Mr. Norton cookie stores.

Terry DiMonte, who knew a good snack treat when he tasted one, did radio endorsements. Eskenazi had some sweet locations: Ste. Catherine opposite the

Eaton Centre, and Queen Mary Road near Décarie Blvd.

Then the company got big – too big. Struggling franchises in shopping malls, Toronto stores that didn't fly.

Monsieur Félix and Mr. Norton was bankrupt in 1998. And the upshot was a takeover by La Bonbonnière, a franchise chain owned by British-based Sweet Factory, which still operates 20 cookie outlets, mostly in malls.

For 10 years, as his invention was absorbed into the great retail void, Eskenazi – who had retained rights to the name and the cookie recipes – played a lot of golf and did some community work. His involvement with Youth Employment Services was an eye-opener.

"I liked working with young people," Eskenazi said. "And I enjoyed the opportunity to give something back."

Like most thinking people, Eskenazi has become concerned about environmental issues. When he began thinking about ways to resuscitate Monsieur Félix and Mr. Norton by raising



THE GAZETTE  
Eskenazi goes green.

its profile, he came up with the idea of a mobile cooking factory, running on propane and solar power. A year ago, he began shopping by looking up "propane trucks" on Craigslist. His research led him to Portland, Ore., where Eskenazi bought an 18-year-old propane-powered panel truck for \$2,700.

It took him six days to drive back to Montreal – and \$100,000 to rig up the vehicle as Urgence-Biscuits.

"The cookie oven cost more than the truck," Eskenazi said. "So did the generator and the solar panels."

It's a high-tech vehicle. The convection oven can crank out six trays of 40 cookies in nine minutes. There's wireless Interac – one customer used it to pay for three cookies, at \$1.10 each, on Saturday night. Exterior features range from the ultra-modern (an HDTV screen that runs off a hard drive in the truck) to the traditional (a roll-out awning). And like an ambulance, the front of the truck is emblazoned with "stiucsiB-ecnegrU", which reads correctly in a rear-view mirror.

Eskenazi has thought of everything – including an astute partnership. He's hooked up with Environnement Jeunesse, which receives 5 per cent of his



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL ESKENAZI

High-tech mobile cookie factory has been on a roll since May.

cookie sales. An organization that promotes green thinking among young people, Environnement Jeunesse is involved in the initiative that has closed a stretch of Ste. Catherine St. E. to traffic this summer. That was Eskenazi's entrée to the Village.

One of the few vehicles you see is the cookie truck, which is making 15 appearances, weekends and on free outdoor movie Wednesday nights. Urgence-Biscuits has also taken freshly baked cookies to charity golf tournaments and to civic celebrations, including Canada Day in Pointe Claire and, less happily, Fête Nationale festivities in Parc Maisonneuve.

"They gave us a horrible loca-

tion behind the outhouses," Eskenazi recalled ruefully "It wasn't a great place to sell cookies. We did better on June 23rd at the Montreal West Fête party"

Urgence-Biscuits will be in Hampstead next month at a benefit for the Montreal Children's Hospital. Eskenazi is also booked for McGill and Concordia homecoming events, where he'll donate a cut of sales to the student associations.

And in between Gay Village gigs, he'll be taking cookies – six flavours, none of which is haggis – to the Highland Games.

"That's my demographic," Eskenazi joked. "Men in skirts."

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