

Cookie wagon rolls to the rescue of hunger and environment

“(The truck) has most of the ... amenities of a modern kitchen.”

BILL BROWNSTEIN
on *Urgence Biscuits*

It's

an ambulance! It's Goofy's truck, gone AWOL from Disney World! No, it's Urgence Biscuits, a solar and propane-powered truck coming to the rescue of all those in need of a sugarpowered chocolate-cookie fix – not to mention, coming to the aid of the environment. Of course, devour too many of these intoxicating – mmm – chocolate cookies, and you could soon be seeing Urgences Santé at your doorstep.

And who is the modern-day superhero at the wheel of this cookie wagon? Why, none other than the creator of Monsieur Félix and Mr. Norton's gourmet cookies, Michael Eskenazi.

At this point, cookies aren't the problem. Corners are. That is, negotiating turns in the 23foot-long Urgence Biscuits truck, which could be pressed into service as a tank with Eskenazi behind the wheel. But since acquiring this eco-friendly vehicle in Oregon a few months ago and making the long trek back here (all the while amusing hardened truckers on the road to no end with his driving skills), Eskenazi has been making major progress. Still, he denies he's contemplating an 18-wheeler to schlep his cookies around.

In the good old days of the Cold War era, half a century back when lactose intolerance wasn't much on the radar, the Good Humor Man would troll the streets of the U.S. heartland in an ice cream truck with bells announcing his presence. The Good Humor Man, decked out in white, was a jolly figure – more beloved to U.S. children than, say, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Roy Rogers and – why not? – the latter's steed Trigger combined.

Of course, in this day and age, the Good Humor Man just might get busted as a suspected perv by police – that is, if not first apprehended by a vigilante group of citizens. Which explains why Eskenazi, despite his solid familyman credentials, will not be trolling the streets in his cookie truck, but rather will be going only where's he invited. Like festivals, charity affairs, sporting events, corporate functions, block parties, bar mitzvahs and supermarket openings.

What also sets Eskenazi's Urgence Biscuits apart from Good Humor is that he is donating five per cent of sales (not profits) to ENVironnement JEUnesse – which means that if you inhale one of his cookies, you will be helping to educate folks on environmental issues. Plus, Eskenazi pledges to donate up to another 20 per cent of sales to other groups promoting environmental issues.

So what gives? An entrepreneur more concerned with ecosystems than profits? “Good things will come to my business over time, but at this point it's more important to give something back and to promote something to help the planet,” says Eskenazi, 52, married and the father of two teenage girls. After all, no planet, no business.

While the Good Humor Man's gasoline-powered truck was pretty much no-frills, apart from the bells and ice cream, the Urgence Biscuits wagon is a hightech homage to the new millennium. Apart from running on clean-burning propane and solar energy, it is equipped with a state-of-the-art sound and video system. Eskenazi even produced a rockin' video with his take on Cookie Monster, in which the Sesame Street critter is down in the dumps after finding carrots and celery but no cookies in his fridge.

Eskenazi does not advocate a junk-food diet, but he feels a little indulgence is in order every so often. “People used to ask us if we could bake low-calorie cookies that tasted as good as our cookies,” he recalls. “So we started experimenting with healthy stuff like bran, flax and even bite-sized morsels of celery instead of chocolate. But everyone preferred the original.”

Flax may have its place in the food chain, but not in the Félix and Norton cupboard.

After a stint acquiring real estate for a major retail chain, Eskenazi started his cookie company here in 1985, based on secret recipes he had been tinkering with since he was a kid. But in 1998, after Félix and Norton reached the top of the local cookie heap, the stores were sold to La Bonbonnière, although Eskenazi retained rights to the name and the recipes.

COURTESY OF MICHAEL
ESKENAZI



The Urgence Biscuits truck is the brainchild of Michael Eskenazi, creator of Monsieur Félix and Mr. Norton's gourmet cookies.



Last year, after a brief retirement period, Eskenazi decided he wanted to get back into the biscuit biz. So while La Bonbonnière still operates the 20 Félix and Norton outlets, mostly in malls, in Quebec and Ontario, Eskenazi wanted to change focus and bring the company up to speed on other levels.

“The objective was not to become the owner of a fleet of cookie trucks, but simply to do something fun and to create a little awareness for the environment at the same,” he says. “What better way to deliver warm cookies than by baking them right here in the truck?”

The truck is outfitted with a nifty, propane-run convection oven that can crank out the six varieties of Félix and Norton cookies within 10 minutes. It also has most of the other amenities of a modern kitchen. “People tell me that I could live in this truck, but I hope not. That would mean I’d be turfed out of my house and on the street.”

Sure, but as long as he is carrying cookies on board, he will always be everyone’s friend.