

YOU

PAYING TRIBUTE TO A LEGEND

Nine Canadian musicians are recording their favourite Leonard Cohen songs to mark the release of film *Death of a Ladies' Man* on March 12. The movie shares its name with Cohen's 1977 album and draws inspiration from the themes of his songs.

Each day from March 12 to 20, a different artist will release a performance video on their social media pages. The lineup features, in order: Ron Sexsmith, Whitehorse, Karelle Tremblay, Dan



Mangan, Jenn Grant, Chad VanGalen, Mo Kenney, Hayden Desser and Leif Vollebek.

Death of a Ladies' Man, from director Matt Bissonnette, stars Gabriel Byrne as a carousing professor and will be available on the Apple TV app, iTunes and other VOD streaming platforms. Before his death in 2016, Cohen, shown, gave the filmmakers permission to use his music in the film. *Melissa Hank*

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Steve Bonneau, left, and Stéphane Bonneau's company Variétés S.D.S. used to sell multiple versions of its popular *retailles d'hosties*, including wafers without holes and wafers with two oversized holes (to avoid confusion with actual communion wafers, which are smaller). They now focus solely on bags of uncut wafer sheets, their bestselling item. *JACQUES BOISSINOT*

MARK CARDWELL

QUEBEC The COVID-19 pandemic has been hell for the sale of hosts, the tiny round sacramental wafers that Christians consume during communion.

But it's been a godsend for a small Quebec City company that is a giant in the manufacturing of host cuttings, a healthy and nostalgic snack food that is popular among French Catholics of all ages in la belle province.

"We can't keep up with demand," said Stéphane Bonneau, co-owner of Variétés S.D.S., a family-run business that has been making host-cutting wafers for the Quebec commercial food market since 1979.

"We've been going 24 hours a day in three shifts, five days a week — even six at one point in 2020," said Bonneau. "Our machine never stops."

Host cuttings — *retailles d'hosties* in French — are the trimmings that remain after small, round portions have been cut out for use as communion wafers.

The Bonneau family makes an uncut version of the thin, featherweight crackers in a small commercial bakery in a working-class neighbourhood of Quebec City.

The crisp wafers are packaged in distinctive white paper bags with red and blue lettering in two sizes — 60 and 115 grams — and are sold in food and convenience stores across Quebec.

Made from a mixture of water and flour and heated evenly between hot plates, the unleavened wafers — which become hosts once they are blessed — have long played an important part in western Christianity.

Many churches use hosts as either a symbolic or literal consumption of the flesh of Jesus Christ. Christ himself began the tradition, also known as the Eucharist, during the Last Supper.

Communion wafers were traditionally handmade by religious communities, which sold them by the tens of thousands to churches and parishes.

But in Quebec, host cuttings also became a popular snack, especially in areas with wafer-making monasteries.

"We used to sell them at cathedrals here and in Ottawa," said Sis-

ter Nicole Hamel, prioress of the Montreal Carmelites, a religious order that began making host wafers at its monastery in Mile End soon after its founding in 1875. "It helped to cover the cost of the flour."

The Carmelites ramped up production in 1991 when they imported a six-oven baking machine from Europe. Since then, however, demand for hosts has declined in step with church attendance. So, too, has the number of religious communities in Quebec that make altar breads.

After 2014, when the Carmelites in Trois-Rivières ceased production, the Montreal sisters were the last religious church wafer manufacturers in the province. They, too, ended their two-day-a-week production cycle last June.

"It was time," said Hamel, who estimates the average age of the 11 remaining sisters at the monastery to be around 75. "We were still able to do it. But it's quite physical mixing the flour, which comes in 20-kilogram bags, and cleaning up afterwards."

Pandemic-related restrictions



I'm getting calls all the time now from people wanting to come here and buy 25 bags. But I tell them no, they have to be patient and buy from stores.

on church attendance and outright closures have also all but killed demand for such products.

"There's been a huge decline across the board," said Jacques Laroche, owner of Ecclesiastical Supply Center, a Quebec City company that sells religious vessels, statues and other religious items and services to mostly institution-

al clients. "It makes you wonder if and when things will recover."

The same can't be said for host cuttings, a niche market dominated by the Bonneau family.

The business was started by Gaston Bonneau, a Quebec City entrepreneur with a small plumbing and heating business and a number of seasonal ice-cream counters.

On advice from his wife, Danielle (the D in Variétés S.D.S., also named for Bonneau's sons), Bonneau started using a custom-made oven to produce batches of non-punched sheets of communion wafers for sale in food stores.

"I went to Montreal with 200 cases on a Friday to meet the wholesaler for the Metro grocery store chain," Bonneau, 74, said from Florida. "He told me I was crazy, that no one would buy them, and turned me down flat."

Bonneau, however, spent the weekend visiting Metro stores across Montreal, giving owners boxes of his wafers free of charge.

"I told them, 'If you sell them, call your wholesaler and tell him you want more,'" he said.

"Monday morning at nine

o'clock, the guy called me: 'Hey, what the hell did you do? I'm getting swamped with calls from Metro store owners who sold all your stock and want more.'"

After that, Bonneau signed deals with most other leading Quebec food stores. Since then, the company has developed a network of distributors that sell to stores of all kinds and sizes.

Fifteen years ago, Bonneau bought a fully automated baking and packaging system. He said he has turned down many offers to expand his customer base beyond Quebec, including one to supply U.S. giant Dollar Tree with 10,000 cases of 24 bags each month.

"We don't need to expand," he said. "We've got a company that is functioning very well."

Initially, Bonneau made two kinds of altar-bread wafers: one without holes, and another with two oversized holes (to avoid confusion with actual communion wafers, which are smaller). He also sold the cut-out pieces as a separate product. Last year, however, his sons decided to stop making the cut-out pieces and the sheets with holes to focus solely on the bags of uncut wafer sheets, which have always been the company's bestselling item.

"It wasn't worth it to keep making the other kinds anymore," said Stéphane Bonneau.

According to Stéphane, who helped his father build the company he now runs with his brother Steve, sales of the uncut sheets remain red hot.

"People who normally buy one bag are now buying four or five," he said, though "hoarding hurts because it cleans stores out of inventory."

"I'm getting calls all the time now from people wanting to come here and buy 25 bags. But I tell them no, they have to be patient and buy from stores, because we work through our distributors."

Host cuttings, Stéphane adds, are the perfect snack to be selling these days in Quebec.

"They're like chips: you can't open a bag and not eat them all," he said, laughing. "But the thing is, they're good for you. And they bring back a lot of happy memories for people. What more can you ask for?"

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