

# COMMUNIQUÉ

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## Homage to a lost institution **Bens, The Legendary Deli, at the McCord Museum**

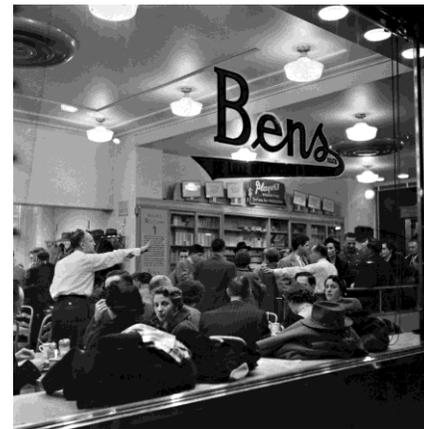
Montreal, June 17, 2014 – Having grown over the years into an almost mythical institution whose reputation extended far beyond borders, frequented by both ordinary and famous customers, Bens Delicatessen, founded in 1908 by Benjamin Kravitz (1883-1956), closed in 2006 after nearly a century in business. Today, its memory is being revived by the McCord Museum through the exhibition **Bens, The Legendary Deli**, presented from June 19 to November 23, 2014. The exhibition brings together some 100 objects, including posters, architectural plans, photos, counter stools, dishes, utensils, menus, recipes and testimonials that recount the history of this landmark, the very first of Montreal's famous smoked meat restaurants.

*“This exhibition carries a certain sense of nostalgia and will spur fond memories among many visitors. In fact, thousands of Montrealers enjoyed countless meals, day and night, in this smoked meat hub with its one-of-a-kind atmosphere. When contacted by Elliot Kravitz, grandson of Ben Kravitz, the McCord Museum was delighted to be able to help preserve so many elements of this iconic eating establishment. Not only do they symbolize an era, they represent a culinary tradition that is typically Montreal and continues to thrive today,”* states Suzanne Sauvage, President and Chief Executive officer of the Museum.

### The history of a restaurant

Born in Lithuania, Benjamin Kravitz fled his country in 1899, along with thousands of other Jews. After settling in Montreal, he met and married Fanny Schwartz, and the couple opened a sweet shop at the corner of St. Laurent Boulevard and Duluth Street. Before long, in response to popular demand, Ben began offering workers in the area smoked meat sandwiches, made according to a family recipe. In 1930, Bens Delicatessen & Sandwich Shop moved to the corner of Burnside Place (now De Maisonneuve Boulevard) and Metcalfe, a district that was bustling around the clock. To accommodate its clientele, who came from all walks of life, the restaurant stayed open 22 hours a day. Offered were fresh, quickly prepared dishes from both Eastern Europe and North America. The smoked meat sandwich, with a side of coleslaw and fries, remained the central menu item, propelling it to become a renowned Montreal specialty.

In 1949, prompted by their success, Ben and Fanny moved their restaurant to a larger space across the street. The new building was designed by Architect Charles Davis Goodman, who opted for the Streamline Modern style. Ben's three sons carried on the work of their father, who died in 1956. By 1960, the restaurant was serving 8,000 customers a day and employed a staff of 80. Passers-by, regulars, tourists and international celebrities would stop in, and it was not unusual to find oneself seated next to the likes of Catherine Deneuve, Liberace, Mad Dog Vachon, Leonard Cohen, Bette Midler, Iron Maiden, René Lévesque, Jacques Parizeau,



Bens dining room seen from the street, 1952, Basil Zarov, gift of Bens Realty Inc., McCord Museum, 2008.8.2.1.61.12.



Al Kravitz slicing smoked meat behind the counter at Bens, 1952, Basil Zarov, gift of Bens Realty Inc., McCord Museum, M2008.8.2.1.63.

Pierre Elliott Trudeau, poets, writers or professional athletes. However, the times began to change. Other fast food restaurants opened in the city, and the clientele at Bens declined. Ben's sons Irving and Sollie died in the 1990s, and Al died in 2000. Despite the third generation of the Kravitz family carrying on the business, a labour dispute erupted in 2006, followed by a strike. This would mark the end of the Bens era, with the restaurant closing its doors in December 2006.

### An act of remembrance

To preserve the memory of their business and what it represented to them, the Kravitz family contacted the McCord Museum in early 2007. The Museum, as both a nearby neighbour and an institution dedicated to the history of the city, became the natural home for the restaurant's archives, objects and artifacts.

*"Bens was not just a restaurant; it was a place that drew thousands of people – Montrealers and tourists alike. Many customers were regulars who came in almost every day. People would arrive alone, with colleagues, family members or friends at all times of the day or night. The ambiance was unlike anywhere else,"* affirms Elliot Kravitz, grandson of the founder of Bens. *"It was in homage to all of these customers and their memories of meals enjoyed at Bens that we wanted the McCord Museum to present this exhibition. Our goal is to enable visitors, as they view the exhibition, to recapture moments from the past and relive their unique experience in a place that became, thanks to them, a legendary aspect of life in Montreal."*

Céline Widmer, Curator, History and Archives, has coordinated the exhibition **Bens, The Legendary Deli** in collaboration with the team in the Conservation department.

### Children's activity

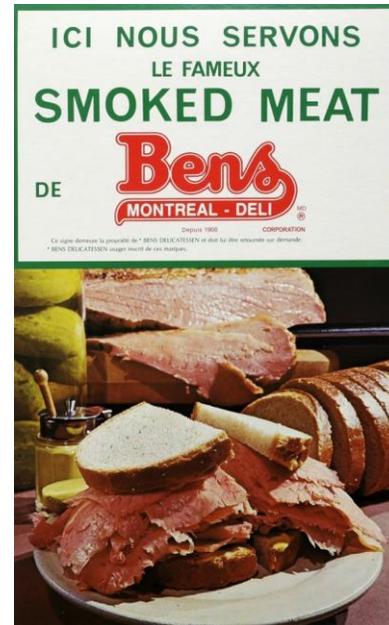
A backpack containing everything visitors will need for *The Adventure at the Museum*, an initiative of Hydro-Québec and Motherforlife.com, is provided to families free of charge at the admissions desk. A puzzle representing one of the images featured in the exhibition *Bens, The Legendary Deli* is included in the backpack. Parents and children can team up to put together the puzzle and find it in the exhibition.

### Exclusive to the Museum's Café-Bistro

Throughout the exhibition period, the famous Bens smoked meat prepared according to the original recipe, will be offered at the Museum's Café-Bistro and terrace.

### About the McCord Museum

The McCord Museum is dedicated to the preservation, study and appreciation of Montreal's history, as recounted by its people, artists and communities living in the city's past and present. The McCord Museum is home to one of the largest historical collections in North America, consisting of First Peoples objects, costumes and textiles, photographs, decorative and visual artworks, and textual archives, totalling more than 1.4 million artefacts. The McCord Museum produces exciting exhibitions that engage visitors from Montreal, Canada, and beyond by offering them a contemporary look at the world. The McCord Museum also offers educational and cultural activities, as well as innovative projects on the Internet. **McCord Museum: Our People, Our Stories.**



Advertisement for Bens smoked meat  
About 1980  
Gift of Bens Realty Inc.  
McCord Museum, M2008.8.146

Photographs available at <http://bit.ly/1s8JIW4>. Interviews can be arranged with Suzanne Sauvage, Interviews can be arranged with Suzanne Sauvage, President and CEO of the McCord Museum, and Céline Widmer, Curator, History and Archives.

**Source and information:**

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The Museum is grateful for the support of the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec and the Conseil des arts de Montréal, Accès Montréal, CAA, as well as its media partners *Journal 24 h*, *The Gazette* and *La Vitrine Culturelle*.