



# Stark & Whyte

Montreal's hip new 'big box store with an edge' is selected as Canada's Global Innovator Award winner for 2010

Now celebrating its 10th year, the Global Innovator Awards (*gia*) were created by the International Housewares Association in partnership with trade magazine editors around the world. The award honours outstanding housewares merchandising retailers from 17 countries each year at the March International Home + Housewares Show in Chicago, where five Global winners are selected by an expert jury. *Home Style* has been proud to be the Canadian *gia* sponsor since the program's inception.

**T**he moment you step into Stark & Whyte, you know this isn't your typical kitchen shop. Clean and airy, with towering graphics, the impact is striking. This spacious 9,000-square-foot store uses fixturing as part of its design element, providing a seamless blend of product displays and a vast assortment that caters to virtually every cooking need.

Owner Philip Stark is no stranger to retail design awards. Less than two years after opening, he has already received international recognition and Stark & Whyte has become a leading destination shop for foodies in Quebec. But that doesn't mean he had it right from the start. In fact, when the store first opened, it offered both home and bath decor. Stark learned very quickly, however, that it was kitchenware his customers wanted.

Today, Philip stays true to his mission to offer the best quality and selection of kitchenware, to educate customers about cooking, and to enhance their joy of cooking. As he explains it: "I'd rather be king of the kitchen than number two in a kitchen and home décor combo."

Although this is his first venture into housewares, Stark has had an im-





In terms of visual merchandising, Stark & Whyte is a retail stand-out. Despite the massive assortment of products, the store maintains a spacious, open feel. There are surprising elements, such as a 13-foot communal 'reading table', left, where customers can search through cookbooks to get inspired. Cookware and bakeware vie for top position as the best selling categories, but the tasting bar and weekly cooking demonstrations, above, have helped enhance the store's culinary appeal.



The interior and all branding elements were created by Robert Ruscio of Ruscio Design Studio in Montreal and the store was built by Dama Construction. The design concept was a clean slate, a style that infused warehouse aesthetic with a specialty boutique feel. The space also cleverly plays off the store's name. An open ceiling with industrial bay lights is treated with a series of staggered canvas banners. Oversized vinyl graphics in vanilla over chocolate brown illustrate the joys of cooking throughout the store.



## Stark & Whyte, Montreal

pressive career in retailing. Although he was born in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), it started in his native South Africa in the 1970s where he was involved in everything from the grocery industry to home textiles and apparel. After emigrating to Canada in 1987, he held senior positions in Dylex, then Roots Canada before moving to Bouclair in Montreal in 2001. Shortly afterward, he partnered in a jewelry business but was unhappy with the store roll-out strategy and sold his shares. His interest in cooking eventually got him thinking about a kitchen shop – one that would provide the best products at a great price as well as in-store education to improve cooking skills.

First, he needed a location, and he found the perfect one in the trendy new Quartier Dix30 shopping complex on Montreal's south shore. This 'lifestyle' centre features designer retail outlets, restaurants, a supper club and a chic boutique hotel, The Alt. It's the ideal setting for a hip 'big box' kitchen store.

Philip Stark opened the doors to Stark & Whyte on a hot July day in 2008 and both colleagues and customers were drawn to the 'stark', chic ambience of the store. As he racked up design awards from *Chain Store Age*, the Association for Retail Environments and the International Council of Shopping Centres, Philip was continually tweaking his assortment.

All along, his goal was to bring back the bonding experience of dining together with family and friends. The French quote displayed in the store entrance says it all: "The art of cooking celebrates life and culture, nourishes, evokes emotion, inspires and, best of all, brings family and friends together."

Today, the 'test' phase is over. Bath décor, candles and frames have disappeared from the shelves, replaced by a sleek tasting bar and more kitchenware. And the store is now proudly affiliated with the Centre de formation professionnelle Jacques-Rousseau. This top-rated chef's school in Longueuil gives students a chance to train for a career in the culinary



Above: the store's front cash desk fits in beautifully with the sparse design of the store.

Left: Stark & Whyte holds product demonstrations every Sunday. Last November Jacques Henry, shown, the fifth generation owner and president of Emile Henry, hosted a 'pan signing' while a chef prepared recipes in an Emile Henry tagine.



## Stark & Whyte, Montreal



Philip Stark, left, got his start in retailing over 30 years ago in his native South Africa. Though he had no experience in the housewares industry, his kitchen shop concept has wowed designers around the world. Stark & Whyte has received several awards, including one from the International Council of Shopping Centres.

arts. Chefs from the school offer unique cooking classes on a regular basis in the store.

Philip Stark has also analyzed his customer base and he found that they are only willing to pay for top-end products in certain categories. So the assortment now includes more low-to-mid range price points and an expanded selection in categories such as bakeware and gourmet foods to appeal to a wider audience.

Though the product range is impressive, the real key to the store's success is customer service, including a gift registry. All staff are very well-trained, and product knowledge is gleaned through a 'buddy system' that helps newcomers learn from more experienced managers. Many have been with Philip from day one.

Confident that he has a winning retail concept, Philip is now considering expansion opportunities in Canada and possibly into the U.S. Until then, he is busy setting up a wholesale division selling products under the Stark & Whyte brand, which already includes coffee, spices and pasta and his entire assortment will be available for sale online by the end of the year. The company website is continually upgraded and will soon include a range of gourmet foods.

For now, however, Philip, his staff, and all of us at *Home Style* are keeping our fingers crossed that Stark & Whyte will become the third Canadian *gia* winner to be honoured with a global award at the International Home + Housewares Show in Chicago this March. – Laurie O'Halloran

