

The Logistics of Girl Scout Cookies: Suitcases, Pallets, Mom's Garage

It takes a village to sell a Thin Mint. Parents and girls manage a feat to distribute 200 million boxes as sale moves into its frenzied closing days

By

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In logistics, a critical part of the modern American economy, everything has its high season—whether it's oil pulsing through the nation's railways to meet summer driving demand, or the frenzy to deliver millions of [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) Inc. packages before Christmas Day.



Springtime is Girl Scout cookie season.

“I’m waiting on a truck of Thin Mints from Kentucky,” Ashley Picard, product sales manager for the Girl Scouts of Montana and Wyoming, which serves troops across 245,000 square miles, said earlier this month.

The Girl Scouts of the USA recently started accepting orders online to keep up with how people shop and boost sales in an operation that generates about \$800 million in annual

revenue. Cookies sold on the “Digital Cookie platform” can be shipped through the mail. But some 95% of Girl Scout cookies are still sold and delivered the old-fashioned way: by hand. That means a logistical push to deliver 200 million boxes of cookies across the country in four months managed by moms, dads and little girls.

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Have you ever had trouble finding Girl Scout cookies? Join the conversation below.

In the cookie sale’s final weeks, scout leaders and parents hustling to move product are flying suitcases of cookies across Alaska and orchestrating cross-state handoffs outside Yellowstone National Park. It’s like “Planes, Trains & Automobiles,” but with Samoas moving in every way possible.

Demand in Ms. Picard’s region surged this year and local “cookie cupboards”—where backup inventory is stored—were bare. The council reordered supplies three times. It ran through surplus stock stashed in Washington and California through an arrangement with its Louisville, Ky., baker, one of two suppliers serving the more than 100 regional Girl Scout councils in the U.S.



A pallet of cookies bound for Malta, Mont. PHOTO: GIRL SCOUTS OF MONTANA AND WYOMING
After the shipment arrived in Billings, Mont., on a Friday, council staff rushed it 140 miles to Bozeman, Mont., for transfer to another vehicle that rendezvoused in West Yellowstone with volunteers who used a trailer to haul 1,400 boxes to Jackson, Wyo., for weekend booth sales.

The cookie program's goal is to teach girls business skills and support troop activities. The fundraiser has grown exponentially since the Mistletoe Troop in Muskogee, Okla., sold home-baked cookies in its high-school cafeteria in 1917. By the 1930s, the organization was licensing commercial bakers to produce cookies. Sales rose significantly in the 1960s as baby boomers boosted Girl Scout membership, but have remained largely the same over the past few years.

These days, bakers typically stock warehouses a few weeks ahead to guard against weather delays or other supply-chain hiccups, said Kendra Kidwell, director of national product sales business operations for Girl Scouts of the USA.

“My cookie sale in Indiana started in January, and they started a month before,” she said. “That’s about 5,000 cases of cookies on a truck, 250,000 cases—you’re talking about 50 truckfuls of cookies. And that’s just one council.”



Thin Mints waiting to be picked up by troops in Anaheim, Calif. in January. PHOTO: KEVIN SULLIVAN/ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/GETTY IMAGES

Girl Scout cookie season typically runs from December to mid-April, though timing depends on the individual council. Some troops tally paper order forms from friends and family before ordering from bakeries. Others use past years' sales as a benchmark, which is easier now that software captures the data.

Councils rely on volunteers to handle logistics after the initial “cookie drops” from the bakers. Often, that means parades of parents pulling up to big rigs in school-district parking lots. Troops in California’s Napa Valley use the loading dock of the Laird Family Estate Winery as a distribution point.

“When my first drop comes for the cupboard I have 10 full pallets in my garage,” said Sue Wilkins, who helps run cookie-sale logistics in South San Jose, Calif. “A semi comes and takes up the whole side of the street.”



Sue Wilkins's garage serves as a 'cookie cupboard' in South San Jose, Calif. PHOTO: SUE WILKINS

The process has gotten smoother over time. Ms. Kidwell says. “We are using less gas, doing fewer drops, and using better forecasting to prevent more restocks.”

One council serving parts of Indiana and Michigan outfitted its Fort Wayne office with a concrete-floored 1,500-square-foot space with a receiving dock. The council said it distributed an average of 5,265 boxes a day out of that site this season.

Cookies travel thousands of miles by truck, boat and float plane to reach troops in Girl Scouts of Alaska’s council, covering communities from Denali to Ketchikan south of the 63rd parallel.

Many scouts live in communities that “are not on the road system, so everything has to be shipped or flown in,” chief executive Leslie Ridle said. Nearly 33,000 cases of cookies shipped this year.



Leah Frampton holds Girl Scout cookies that a Twitter friend sent to her in Canada. PHOTO:LEAH FRAMPTON

Shipments are sometimes replenished via air cargo from Anchorage or Seattle. “I’ve shipped them down to Juneau in my suitcases, two big ones,” said Ms. Ridle. “My mom lives in Juneau, so I went down several times.”

People who can’t satisfy cookie cravings locally sometimes resort to buying online from third-party sellers or asking people to send them boxes.

Last month, Leah Frampton of Peterborough, Canada, put out a call on [Twitter](#) for people willing to send her American varieties. “Our Girl Guides only have two types here and both are gross,” she said. She received shipments of Thin Mints, Samoas, Tagalongs, Do-si-dos and Savannah Smiles.



Sending cookies around the country is a logistical challenge. PHOTO: SUE WILKINS

Liz Bagot, a Girl Scout parent whose 950-square-foot Brooklyn apartment sometimes doubles as a troop distribution point during cookie season, says it would be cheaper to use the Digital Cookie option for her daughter’s out-of-town sales. But her family began

shipping the boxes themselves from their neighborhood copy shop before that program rolled out, and some customers have come to expect that level of service.



Jadrey Reynon, a scout in Alaska, sells cookies locally and to relatives in Hawaii. PHOTO:MARGO PETERS
“It’s insane considering we could go online and order them and have them sent faster and for less out-of-pocket.” Ms. Bagot said. “This is not rational, but it’s about our enthusiasm for supporting the troop and our daughter, Carrie.”

Jadrey Reynon, a 15-year-old scout in Unalaska in Alaska's Aleutian Islands, typically sells about 20 or 30 boxes to relatives in Hawaii. She rarely uses the Digital Cookie option because her internet service is clunky.

"Usually, my Dad and I put them in the flat-rate boxes," she said, packing as many boxes as possible in one big Oahu-bound parcel. "We tell them to give us about \$20 more than they're giving us for the cookies."