

## our people

# Living the cookie dream

After 25 years at the helm of one of New Zealand's most successful snack food companies, Michael Mayell is as enthusiastic about the business as ever. MARC GREENHILL reports.

**I**f not for a simple glass jar, Michael Mayell's Cookie Time dream could have crumbled. The iconic Kiwi snack, still under the ownership of Mayell and brother Guy, has marked 25 years since a dream to emulate a popular American cookie turned into a multi-million-dollar Canterbury business.

Mayell, with his naturally enthusiastic persona, opts for an understated "satisfied" to describe the achievement. "It's certainly a long time to be in one business."

The glass jar and its counter position was by chance a marketing masterstroke. Having the jars made at \$24 each was a risk with his limited capital.

"A glass cookie jar with these beautiful unwrapped cookies — people just went bloody crazy over them, it basically was just an overnight hit. There's no question a major factor for that was the cookie jar on the counter."

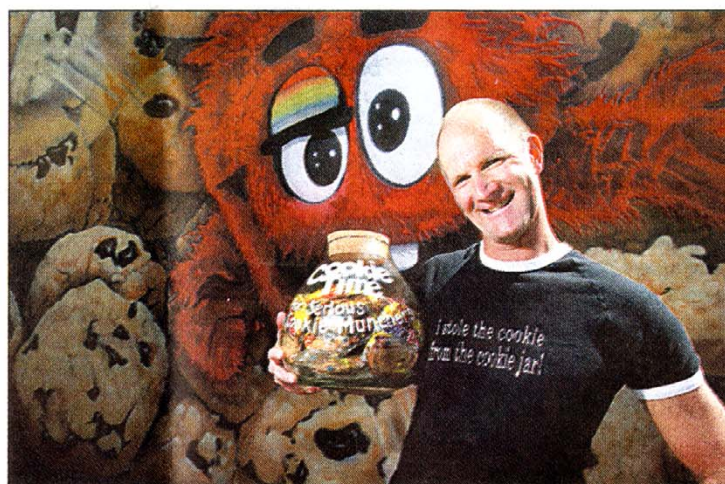
Mayell says refining the business over time has been a successful formula and the double act with his younger brother has allowed each the chance to focus on other goals.

"Over the 25 years we've had numerous times when I've been running the business and he's been focussing on something else, or he's been running the business and I've been having a year-and-a-half overseas thinking about personal development.

"If you stay in the same business you kind of get a bit insular and by stepping out and doing other things, when you come back in you bring back all the ideas and different perspectives."

Mayell has always been one to think big, despite two earlier efforts failing.

At age 18, his desire was to be his own boss but the idea of starting a business was "too scary". Fast-forward three years, and with



Star jar: Michael Mayell founder of Cookie Time at the factory in Templeton.

\$10,000 in the bank and no job, the big idea was the big biscuit — inspired by the Mrs Field's brand in the United States.

He says two weeks were spent convincing 70 dairies to agree to sell Cookie Time.

At 7am on February 7, the first batch of 3150 cookies (45 for each shop) were delivered.

"I'm sitting by the telephone in my flat thinking 'Christ, I wonder

what's happening out there'. At three o'clock, the phone starts ringing and suddenly an hour later I've had 15 phone calls saying 'we're completely sold out, when can I get some more?'"

Both brothers were budding entrepreneurs even in their early teens with a host of small-time money-making ventures. Mayell says money was never a taboo subject in the family. "Money was

talked about like anything else. We just grew up knowing all about the family finances and how much things cost."

Father Ted was a doctor who sidelined in property development, while mother Heather always backed her boys. "Whatever we wanted to do she was right behind. It really gave you the confidence to try things because you knew you weren't going to come home and be ridiculed.

"There was an ability for you to fail, but still have support."

Mayell set the goal to be a millionaire by age 30 and was not far off. "I was prepared to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week if that's what it took, then I could spend the rest of my life swanning by a swimming pool drinking margaritas in the sun.

"You don't end up having to do that, but being prepared to do it is part of the formula for success."

He is now turning his attention to the global market in which he sees a gaping hole, especially in Europe.

"If we can get our cookie, with the quality of our ingredients, into that market, it will work."