



Small-car collector finds little goes a long way

mini to the max

By CARA NISSMAN

The fire-engine red station wagon speeds around a Watertown street corner as effortlessly as a kid's Hot Wheels flies over linoleum. And at 4 feet tall by 4 feet wide by 10 feet long, it's not much bigger.

Near the Arsenal Mall, passers-by stop, stare and point at the compact contraption — a 1963 Mini Traveller. Hrach Chekijian of Watertown owns five versions of the Mini, but his favorite is the wagon, replete with red-and-black-plaid seats, ash wood trim and a squeaky horn for use when cutting off cars three times its size.

"I call it the Woody Wagon," said Chekijian. "I drove to Montreal in it. The design is very deceptive. It's small, but it's very roomy. You can fit six people in it comfortably."

About 10,000 Minis, first built in England after World War II in response to gas rationing, were sold in the United States before they were discontinued in 1967. The tiny car is now making a comeback: A new, slightly expanded MINI (now 5 1/2 feet high by 5 1/2 feet wide by 12 feet long), featured in a recent Target commercial, went on the market in March. In the film "The Bourne Identity," Matt Damon careens through the cramped streets of Paris in an old Mini.

Chekijian is president of the 140-member New England Mini Owners group, which participates in car shows and races around the country, and works 70 hours a week selling the new models for Peabody MINI.

"Nobody's as passionate as me about the Mini," he said, chuckling over the banana yellow 1979 Mini Moke (with Tweety Bird floor mats) he drove around the country nearly 20 years ago. "I like it because of its history, shape, character and performance."

Chekijian, who has owned 32 Minis over the last 33 years, said the cars were "the Harleys of my generation" when he was growing up in Beirut, Lebanon. After immigrating to the United States as a teenager, Chekijian received his first Mini (a silver-and-black Morris Cooper) as a gift from his brother, who was living in London.

"I was in heaven," said the boisterous Chekijian, who twirls his handlebar moustache as he talks a mile a minute. "I was the only person in town driving one of these unique cars."

Since then, the collector, who has a penchant for puns (he recommends dining on "ministrone soup" before checking out his collection), has acquired and given away dozens of Minis, and volunteers his "Mini Superman" mechanical services to fellow



DRIVING PASSION: Hrach Chekijian, top, in his Mini Moke, and showing off one of his model Minis, above. Chekijian has owned 32 Minis during the last 33 years.



A SHINING EXAMPLE: Hrach Chekijian cleans the engine of his '63 Mini Traveller.

Staff photos by MARK GARFINKEL

Mini enthusiasts. Although he's loyal to the old Mini's design, Chekijian said he's eager to buy a new MINI.

"I like the original's simplicity," he said, "but after 40 years, it's time to (let the Mini) get larger so the American public can enjoy its originality and its (sports-car) cornering."

Unfortunately, all this Mini memorabilia takes up maximum space in the 100-foot by 35-foot Watertown storage space that Chekijian calls "The First Mini Museum in the United States." It's packed tighter than the Southeast Expressway at rush hour with everything from "I Love My Mini" bumper stickers to Mini-inspired jewelry.

"I have 500 T-shirts, 100 books, 50 albums, movies, stickers, hats," he said, offering his guest a MINI mint. "Hopefully, I'll get a bigger space."

The cars may be small, but "most people who own Minis are over 6 feet tall," said Chekijian, who's no Mini-Me himself. "You



MINI MUSEUM: Hrach Chekjian, above, president of the New England Mini Owners, keeps his Minis and Mini-related collectibles at a storage facility in Watertown.



BIG WHEEL: Hrach Chekjian, above, is not intimidated by Boston traffic — not even trucks, above left — at the wheel of his 'Woody Wagon.'

have to drive a Mini aggressively, especially in Boston. I've been driving in Boston many years, so I don't fear big trucks."

A mini expert in lots of fields, Chekjian swiftly shifts gears from discussing auto parts to Eastern philosophy to geology to cooking. He also crafts items out of Mini parts. One of his most curious creations is a colorful barbecue grill, which features camshafts as legs and pushrods as shish-kebab skewers for his signature Mini kebabs.

"I always cook for events," said the former chef and jeweler, who wears a gold Mini bracelet he made.

Chekjian also displays a photograph of himself with Julia Child, for whom he created gold earrings shaped like potatoes. He met the famous chef at a friend's posh tuber tasting a few years ago. "They were very appealing," he quipped. "I told Julia she had found her child. We have the same chubby cheeks." Between work and collecting, the enthusiast has minimal time left for a social life.

"That's why I'm not married," he said, pouting playfully. "And sometimes my energy can be overwhelming. I scare people

Gear up for Minis

For an up-close look at Mini cars, step on the gas and zoom over to the Museum of Transportation, 15 Newton St., in Brookline, from 1-4 p.m. on Saturday for Micro Mini Car Day. Tickets are \$5 for adult, \$3 for children. For information, call 617-522-6547 or log on to www.mot.org.

away sometimes."

Perhaps at the next Mini festival, he'll meet a woman as devoted as he is.

"Life is a journey," he said. "I'd like to share this with someone."

Where's Minnie Driver when you need her?

Motivated to learn more about the Mini? Call Hrach Chekjian at 617-797-6718 or visit www.airportworld.com/NEMO_main.htm for information about New England Mini events and news.