

## Carving a niche

By: Christian Moises, News Editor | October 5, 2009 | 0



New Orleans Ice Sculptors owner John Albrecht puts some details on a carving of an alligator at his shop in Destrehan. (Photo by Frank Aymami)

Ice sculpting isn't necessarily a booming industry with New Orleans' hot weather, but John Albrecht's business isn't exactly melting away.

However, the luxury item can be a tough sell for special events with an economy in the early stages of recovery and a struggling tourism and convention industry.

"We're the first to go," said Albrecht, who started New Orleans Ice Sculptors about 15 years ago.

"When people are looking at budgets for weddings, they'll cut us first. They're not going to cut out the groom's cake, music or limo. We're probably the last one on and the first one off."

Amy Odinet, director of catering at the Ritz-Carlton in New Orleans, has seen that tapering off at events at the hotel.

"People will still spend disposable income on weddings, but it's definitely something for someone with disposable income," Odinet said.

Jeff Peterscak, executive director of the National Ice Carving Association, admits that some of the group's roughly 400 members worldwide are hurting more than others, but the industry isn't losing businesses left and right. There are three sculptors based in Louisiana with two of those in New Orleans, according to NICA's Web site.

Despite the economic drag on demand for sculptures, fall and Christmas are looking strong for Albrecht because of conventions, which make up about half of his business. Weddings make up the other half, followed by private events such as birthday and office parties filling in the gaps.

Albrecht is the executive chef at the Federal Reserve Bank but believes he could survive solely on the sculpture business. He carved about 370 pieces in 2008.

New Orleans Ice Sculpture's average creation — a swan, fleur de lis or kissing birds on a heart, for example — comes from a block of ice that is 40 inches tall, 20 inches wide and 10 to 12 inches thick. Sculpture prices start at roughly \$400.

But if frozen water and a chainsaw seem like pretty low overhead, think again.

"We make our own ice, but the ice machines are \$6,500 apiece," he said. "We have three walk-in freezers, which aren't cheap, electricity and labor," which includes Albrecht, his wife and his son, who work pretty much full time, and several delivery drivers. "And then there's the water bills."

Albrecht's ice machines aren't just run-of-the-mill freezers. They are specially designed for sculptors and create perfectly clear blocks.

"We're not just throwing water into a freezer."

Peterscak shares those sentiments.

"(Party guests) ask if I do it for a living," he said. "I don't think they look at it as a business. Their contact with ice sculptures isn't a whole lot."

While chainsaws are still the preferred tool for the initial stages, Peterscak said innovations during the past two decades have helped the industry take off.

For example, computer numerical controlled, or CNC, machines have made it easier for sculptors to be more detailed, such as spelling out names or replicating logos.

The technology has helped satisfy some of the carvers' biggest clients — liquor and promotion companies.

"Ice is kind of interactive," Peterscak said. "You can take a liquor company logo and print it on a vinyl sign and hang it up or make the logo out of ice and colored gelatin. Who do you think is going to come up and touch it?"

As for full-time sculptors at hotels, that's a rare breed. But that's kind of how the industry was created, Peterscak said. It's pretty standard to have a class or two devoted to ice carving in culinary school, he said, so it's something the chef normally would do on the back dock. Sooner or later, the chef didn't have enough time or wasn't getting paid enough, so people started creating their own sculpting businesses.

The Ritz-Carlton used to contract many of its carvings to New Orleans-based Ice Dragon Sculptures but has scaled back now that its executive and sous chefs having ice-sculpting skills.

While some hotels nationwide staff full-time carvers, it's not a position that is easily supported, Odinet said, adding that the job just doesn't warrant the salary, especially during the down economy.

"I can almost bet 99.9 percent that there's not a hotel in the city that has a staff member devoted to carvings," she said.