

A Diamond in the Rough

Sculptor captures essence of culinary ice art

By Terri Welch
The Battalion

Ancient Japanese art comes in all forms, but none have the mystery and magic of ice sculpting.

To capture the essence of this unique culinary art, there must be an ice sculptor and Texas A&M has its very own.

Keith Meeks, production manager of the MSC Food Services, had football scholarship offers to almost every major university in the south as a junior in high school, he said. However, when an injury occurred, Meeks said no one knew him anymore.

"Nobody recruits an injured player," he said. "So, upon graduation I found myself unemployed."

The Texas Employment Commission sent Meeks to the Hyatt Regency at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport and that is where he became fascinated with the food industry.

"The European chefs at the hotel saw my fascination and began training me," Meeks said. "I was fortunate to have some of the

finest training available."

After 15 years of moving around in the hotel industry, he married in 1985 and traveling became too taxing on his family life.

"I came to Texas A&M in 1989 for stability and a chance to achieve my goals," he said. "I have the support of my superiors, Ron Beard and Lloyd Smith. We all believe that I can attain those goals."

Here, he has put into practice what one chef taught him earlier...ice sculpting.

"When this chef would carve," Meeks said, "He would drag a block of ice out for me to learn and from there I picked up the techniques."

At this point in his life, he said he is more of a technician. He is striving to be an artist, a master ice carver.

"Ice sculpting is mystical," Meeks said, "It captivates an audience and give an ambiance of sophistication and elegance."

But sculpting does not begin with grace and beauty. It begins with a block of ice usually four



Dressed appropriately for below zero temperatures, Keith Meeks begins work on a block of ice which will eventually be molded into a book. **KARL A. STOLLEIS/The Battalion**

feet high, three feet deep and two feet deep. The temperature of the ice is approximately 18 to 20 degrees Fahrenheit below zero and the working environment is around 26 degrees.

The price of these beautiful creations will send a chill up anyone's spine costing \$100 for simple block letters and numbers to \$200 or more for more complex sculptures.

Meeks said he begins with a chainsaw to get rid of the excess ice and then constructs the details with tools resembling wood chippers. These tools are usually

handcrafted, razor sharp and specifically designed for ice carving.

Ideas for his creations usually come from the people placing the order and Meeks said he can do almost any design.

"The most difficult sculptures are faces," he said. "I have seen them very rarely and only the master carvers do those."

Most of the sculptures for the office of the president, the Board of Regents and the Chancellor's office have been everything from a fighter jet to reindeers and a sled.

"My most accomplished piece is an eagle I carved for a competi-

tion held at a culinary art show at the Messina Hof Winery in conjunction with Spring Festival '91," he said. "I won Best of Show for that piece."

Meeks will carve a crawfish and a gig 'em thumb for an upcoming luncheon that university President William H. Mobley will host for the L.S.U. game.

Just as the chefs took Meeks under their wings to teach him this craft, so has he taken an interest in a young chef at A&M to pass it on.

Carlos Melgoza, from Mexico City and also a chef for the MSC

Food Services, is fascinated with the art of ice sculpting much like Meeks was as a young chef.

Melgoza began his career as a mechanical engineer and for various reasons ended up learning culinary art techniques at the Holiday Inn in Arlington.

"I have been working with (Meeks) for five years and watching him has made me interested," he said.

Both men agree that having a tangible result people can see and admire is a great part of ice sculpting.

"It is a satisfaction you can not get anywhere else," Meeks said.

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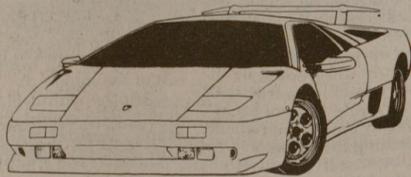
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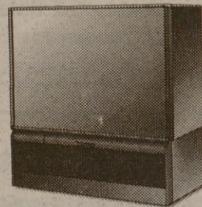
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