

Ice-making operations can be one cool biz

by Anna Cearley

Each morning, Francisco Rodriguez buys a slab of ice at a downtown Tijuana, Mexico, factory that he cuts up and places inside a small pushcart to keep his custard pastries fresh and soft drinks cool.

COOL BIZ - Worker Felipe Careas walks among the giant blocks of ice at a Grupo Glacial facility in Tijuana, Mexico. CNS Photo by John Gibbins. DEMAND HEATING UP - Solomon Alcaraz (left) loads a block of ice onto the cart of snow cone vendor Pedro Zambrano, dressed in Hawaiian shirt and shorts. CNS Photo by John Gibbins. "The ice is very important to keep the treats from going bad," he said as he carefully arranged his treats around the ice. "You also have to make sure the melting water doesn't fall into the merchandise."

For border denizens, the business of ice is more than cubes in soft drinks.

Snow cone vendors scrape at large blocks of ice to make cool treats topped with tamarind- and bubblegum-flavored syrup.

Residents who live in parts of the city where there is no electricity, or who just want to increase the chill inside their refrigerators, also buy ice blocks.

Summer is when production cranks up at Tijuana's six major factories and other smaller operations that cater

to the border area's idiosyncratic demands for ice, as well as the needs of markets, bars and restaurant chains.

Decades ago, entrepreneurial residents drove to San Diego to buy ice and sell it in Tijuana. One of them, Jose Martin Salazar, opened the city's first ice factory in 1945.

The Tijuana Ice Factory, as it is still known, is now one of three that operate under the name Grupo Glacial. It's owned and run by Salazar's descendants.

Cart vendors such as Rodriguez, 62, start their day picking up slabs at the ice factory, about three blocks east of the Avenida Revolucion tourist strip.

He has been selling homemade pastries out of his cart for more than 30 years, and he remembers when the street in front of the factory was a dirt road. A pipe attached to his cart siphons off water from the melting ice as he makes his rounds.

Snow cone vendor Pedro Zambrano, 35, dressed in a tropical uniform of Hawaiian shirt and shorts, says he'll sell about 100 snow cones a day during this summer season.

Hoisting a freshly minted ice block into his cart, he said he grosses about \$50 a day but shares profits with the concession business that provides him with equipment.

About 20,000 gallons of water, pumped from local wells, is brought by truck to the original ice factory each day during the summer, doubling its output from the winter months.

When it first opened, the factory produced solid ice cubes as well as the slabs. In 1987, it started churning out cylindrical ice cubes, with holes in the middle, and applied a reverse osmosis process to improve the purity of the water because the cubes were destined for drinks.

Water for the ice slabs, which are made in 300-pound rectangular blocks, is chlorinated and treated with ultraviolet rays, said Isaac Laniado, Grupo Glacial's manager. Less intensive than reverse osmosis, the treatment brings water to acceptable standards, he said. The slabs, which are mostly used for cooling produce, are then cut into more manageable pieces.

For many years, transporting ice was a race against time, especially when delivery trucks got stuck in the knot of traffic winding its way to the U.S.-Mexico border. Ten years ago, the company started using refrigerated trucks.

Laniado, who used to work for the state water agency, oversees the 24-hour production. When he gets iced drinks around town, he critiques the ice like a diamond expert.

"The first thing I do is look to see if it's ours," Laniado said. "The size of the ice is distinct. One factory has theirs at 2 inches and another is 1 inch."

The company's ice cubes measure 1.5 inches long. He also checks the quality. "You look to see if it's cloudy or clear, and if there are perforations," he said. "It needs to be totally clear."

While most of the factory's clients are large businesses with typical needs of keeping their food and drinks cold, sometimes it gets unusual requests, Laniado said.

When Mexican singer Luis Miguel performed in Tijuana several years ago, his promoters bought several large ice blocks from the factory to carve out the number 33, which was the name of his album. The ice sculptures were displayed in front of the concert hall.

Another time, a circus asked the factory for ice so it could speed up the freezing process for a temporary skating rink.

With Tijuana's population increasing, ice manufacturers don't see their business melting.

"There are more markets and liquor stores and more people, so this is going to mean more demand for ice," Laniado said.

As with other businesses here, the ice factories take precautions to make sure their delivery workers aren't vulnerable to robberies on the road. The factory doesn't permit workers to carry cash, Laniado said.

And the product itself is probably safe from theft, unless the hijackers happen to have a large freezer with them.

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