

# Bundle Up And Belly Up

Winter Garden Ice Bar at Damenti's brings frozen flora and fauna to life in Mountaintop

BY JULIE IMEL

Step inside the Winter Garden Ice Bar at Damenti's Restaurant in Mountain Top, and a frozen world of flora, fauna and hand-carved fun await you. Chef/owner, and expert ice carver, Kevin McDonald and his team of world class ice sculptors have transformed a bocce court in the restaurant's back yard into a true work of art.

After spending just a few minutes with McDonald, who describes himself as a "slice of P.T. Barnum, a pinch of Peter Pan and a dash of Mel Brooks," it's easy to see that his approach to ice carving is one that encompasses wild creativity, a great sense of humor and a fearless spirit.

The Winter Garden Ice Bar not only boasts a 25-foot ice bar where you can sip on Garden Punch with a few friends, but its walls are also covered in designs, such as grapes, swans, butterflies and roses to name a few. On top of the bar are ice snails and mushrooms, a sunflower and even an ice luge custom made for drinking shots. In one corner, a 6-foot tall frog plays violin; in another, a bulky ice bear guards the door. "This ice is expanding and contracting," McDonald said, as he gave us the grand tour. "It's alive."

While many sculptures are already complete, the Winter Garden Ice Bar continues to be a work in progress. McDonald and his crew began their frozen construction inside the refrigerated structure, complete with a roof, about a month ago, and he plans to keep the ice bar open for another six to seven weeks.

"Throughout the remainder of the season, there's a standing invitation for anybody who knows how to carve," he said. "If you give me a buzz and say you know how to carve and would like to do a piece, come on up!"

McDonald enjoys sharing what he has learned in the past 40 years of ice carving with others, even patrons of the bar who express an interest.

"I'll take a very simple ice pick or simple chisel and say, 'Try to make a mushroom.' And they're having fun. They'll say, 'This isn't so hard.'"

Whether you're there for the art, the drinks, or both, bellying up to the ice bar is a lot of fun. Just remember to dress warmly and bring your camera.

McDonald is as good a storyteller as he is an ice sculptor and chef. From how he first

contracted the ice carving bug to his many adventures at Ice Alaska, which hosts the largest annual ice carving competition in the world, McDonald is no amateur at spinning yarns.

It all started in 1986 when he decided to build an ice castle for his daughter, Lauren, who was 3 years old at the time.

"Twenty-five years ago I built the first playhouse ice castle," he said. It was drafted by a friend who was an architect. "Then, daddy had to build bigger one, and then a bigger one, a bigger one, a bigger one," he said, laughing.

He was hooked.

Countless ice castles and sculptures would follow in the years to come. Photos from decades of ice carving line the walls of his office. Pointing out some of his favorite pieces, including a 250-ton Absolut vodka ice palace, McDonald said competing was a great learning experience.

"Back in these days, I was competing and I thought I was good until I found how out how good good is," he said, laughing.

Ice Alaska put him in touch with the best of the best.

"I appreciate ice as a particular artform, and the people who do it — the masters — like the people at Ice Alaska. You don't get there by being an amateur. This is as good as it gets as far as competing."

In addition to building ice castles, McDonald enjoys creating ice cannons (although you won't find one of these in the ice bar).

"One of my specialties is making cannons out of ice. I can shoot a golf ball with 350 grains of black powder over a mile with a cannon made of ice ... and it's a hoot!"

And then there's the story of a terrifying crash.

"The ice behaves so much differently in Alaska. Overnight it will get down to 40 below and if you throw a bucket of water on a pile of ice



or a sculpture, it will explode. It's called thermal shock. You have to be careful of that. So if you're putting water on the ice up there, you have to do it gingerly because if it's too cold, the ice will crack," McDonald explained. "The piece we were building was a series of cut bricks that we were forming to this globe, and we were putting slush on it because we couldn't put all the water on it that we wanted to. It gave way. I was on the scaffolding and it knocked me off the scaffolding and this wall of 5,000 pounds of ice was chasing me into the woods."

Fortunately, he landed between the trees and the ice that was racing towards him stopped just before it crushed him.

In the future, McDonald would like to offer a course in ice carving called Uncle Kevin's Carving College. And, when the weather breaks, he'll transform the bocce court into a sand bar, complete with, you guessed it, sand sculptures.

There is no admission to the Winter Garden Ice Bar, but donations will be accepted for Dennis Beach, a world-class wood carver and ice carver who lost his livelihood in a recent fire. Donations of new and used tools are also welcome.

Damenti's Restaurant is located at 870 N.



Hunter Highway, Mountain Top. The Winter Garden Ice Bar will be open Tuesday through Friday, from 5 p.m. until the restaurant closes, and Saturday and Sunday from noon until closing time. Damenti's is closed on Mondays, except for Valentine's Day. If you know how to carve and you'd like to work with McDonald in the ice bar, or if you'd like to be a guest bartender, call 788-2004. For more information, visit [www.damentis.com](http://www.damentis.com).