Recreating ‘old Lafayette’

Sonny Chastant surveys The Old Ice House Restaurant, newly renovated from the one-time Talley Ice Plant on Pinhook Road here.

Ice House keeps ‘sense of old’

By Jim Bradshaw
Business Editor

Back in the old days, before refrigerators did everything but shine shoes, one of the small adventures of childhood was to ride with your dad to the ice house, where, for 15 or 20 cents a pound, he would pick up the ice we used in homes and businesses.

That little adventure happened for many years in Lafayette at the Talley Ice House, 325 W. Pinhook Road (corner of General Mouton Ave.), until just a few years ago a functioning ice plant.

Today the Lafayette landmark is The Old Ice House Restaurant, and its owner, Sonny Chastant, says part of what he has tried to create at the place is “a sense of old Lafayette,” of the days when the word “value” meant something, and of a place where men and women “find the atmosphere and service that we took for granted in earlier days.”

Patrons who have visited the place since its reopening January 1 under Chastant’s management, say he’s succeeded remarkably well.

First, he gutted the place, opened it up for a freer flow of people and conversation. But, in doing that, he remembered that he was dealing with a piece of nostalgia, and worked to keep that alive, too.

(Under the floor of the main dining area there were several huge holding tanks that circulated salt brine around vats that held the purified water used to make ice. Massive pulleys, cranes and hoists were located in the ceiling, to lift the vats from the brine and move the huge blocks of ice into freezer rooms. These rooms and 18- to 20-inch insulated concrete walls to keep the ice frozen while it was stored and scored into smaller 25-, 50- and 100-pound blocks, some of which would be crushed into block and cube ice.)

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What we wanted to do was make it a place that you feel comfortable about where you are,” Chastant says. “We want people who come to visit us to feel it is ‘their place’ and we’ve designed the facility, our service and our menu with that in mind.”

His luncheon menu (served from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday) offers a variety of po-boys (your choice, $5.95) from catfish, to Black Forest ham, to turkey breast, to roast beef (New Orleans style), Italian meatballs, barbeque sausage, and combinations of them all. Daily luncheon specials include red beans and rice (Monday), spaghetti and meatballs (Tuesday), cabbage rolls with sausage jamabala (Wednesday), chicken fricassee (Thursday), and a catfish platter (Friday).

“He plans later to offer boiled seafood — shrimp, crabs, crawfish — ‘to go only’ from a drive-thru window. ‘We’re going to grow into that,’ he says. ‘First we want to be the place you’ll come to me and greet and talk.”

Happy hour (3 to 6 p.m.) begins when lunch is done. For evening fare, Acadiana’s musicians play the music you remember from the 1960s, 1960s, and 1970s. (There’s no cover charge.)

With its proximity to the airport, Vermilionville, and other tourist destinations, Chastant says he thinks The Old Ice House is “a natural place for tourists to visit, as well — a place where they will find the hospitality and joie de vivre that is so characteristic of Lafayette and Acadiana.”

“I think it is my job to direct tourists to other restaurants as well as my own,” he says, “to provide a ‘spinoff point’ where they can come and find out what we are and what’s to do in Lafayette.”

Chastant has long expertise in the hospitality business — in fact, he was one of the original five trustees of the Lafayette Visitors and Convention Commission.

“Simply put,” he says, “what we’re about is giving back to Lafayette a place that remembers who we are — in comfort, style, and class — so that people can enjoy this old landmark, and just be who they are.”