

# ICE KING: 'CHILL OUT, BE COOL'

By: *David M. Brown*



Ice King Specialty Craft Ice “*The Rock*”

## ICE IS HOT IN THE DESERT

Still, if you're scheduling a visit to Ice King, make sure you pack a jacket and maybe ear muffs. Be prepared to feel cold to the marrow and hear resoundingly what it takes to keep your drinks festively cold on July 4th. At this plant, you learn to appreciate your next shrimp cocktail or craft cocktail.

"I tell people, 'It doesn't take much to make a bag of ice; it does to make 40,000 of them every day,'" explains Ryan Maasen, the charismatic president of the company he acquired in 2004 after graduating from Arizona State University.

In May 2011, when the company moved into its 20,000-square-foot facility in west Phoenix, his Ice King became the Valley's largest locally owned and operated manufacturer and distributor of premium ice products. Fifteen miles away is his competitor, the nation's largest, which keeps Maasen and his group of 45 employees, 38 in the winter, assiduously on task.

This nippy winter morning in Phoenix, he and the company's vice president, Tom Maloney, are guiding a tour of the acre-and-a-half campus, which produces a menu of products, including ice cubes, ice blocks, craft ice and even snow.

The diversified client list, many fellow AFMA members, includes bars and restaurants, retailers, wholesalers, government and industrial entities, food manufacturers, convenience stores, golf courses, marinas, restaurants, construction sites and airports. Parties and events are also buyers: office, church, holiday and special occasions, school and pro-team practices and spring training. Whatever you're serving or hosting, Ice King makes it cool.

The facility includes production, packing, warehouse and administrative space, a maintenance shop and parking for delivery trucks. Inside, a 7,000-square-foot freezer stores a million pounds of palletized inventory, and a backroom deep-freeze grotto is for special products that's set at a brisk 4 degrees Fahrenheit: Brrrrr!

Summer and winter dock hours for loading vary, based on the mercury, but Ice King delivers product 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. "Ice," Maasen says, "never sleeps."

## BUSINESS CLIMATE REPORT: WATER TURNING TO ICE TODAY AND THROUGH THE NIGHT

Outside the building are five humming 150-horsepower V-8 compressors, ensuring that the company methodically grinds out ice year

round. "We really only need four, one for each of the ice-making units inside, but we keep an extra ready, so that if one goes down, we never disappoint our customers," Maasen says. "We have a lot of redundancy here for that reason."

Just inside the building, the water-to-ice metamorphosis, through a safe, economical ammonia-based system, begins at the purification center. Phoenix water is tapped and routed through a three-step reverse-osmosis system to achieve bottled-water quality in each ice cube.

"We reject about 30 percent of the water and send it back to the city for reprocessing," says Maasen, noting wryly that he'd like to send the recently approved Phoenix water-rate increase back with the next disapproved water.

In the next room are four massive heavy-gauge steel cylinders, outputting 24 hours a day in the summer. The oldest was built in 1986, as efficient as the latest 2016 cylinder in the same blue. "They haven't changed very much at all," he says.

What has changed is Ice King's capabilities. The company started here at 50 tons a day, doubled that to 100 in December 2013, then in March 2016 doubled that to the current 200.

No personnel are in contact with product. Maasen notes that Ice King is a VETcom-certified facility — one of the most rigorous inspections possible. "If you sell to the government," he says, "you can sell to just about anybody."

## 'THE HARVEST' AND 'THE ROBOT'

Production for each cylinder is a 15-minute cycle. Water is pumped in from the water purification room through honeycombs in the tanks, forming the cubes, which next drop into cutters.

Then, the cacophonous harvest begins: your freezer ice-maker amplified to a 1,000 watts of cubes jiggling down a transparently enclosed ramp. In three minutes, 1,000 to 1,200 pounds are pushed out and placed into an adjacent storage bin that holds 60 tons. Here, a mechanical raker brings the cubes forward for another conveyor belt which prepares them for bagging.

At this next station, a continuous printed plastic sheet is issued from a suspended roller; the bags are date stamped, counted, cut, sealed at the bottom, filled with ice, 10, 20 or 40 pounds, then sealed at the top for the final product.



“We actually like to see them about a half-pound heavy to make sure we are always more than satisfying our customers’ expectations,” Maasen says, noting that the bags are weight checked every hour. Based on a 20-hour summer-season bagging schedule, the packing room outputs 40,000 bags a day of the 10-pound product, the most popular product.

Before the bags are inspected by a metal detector they are routed for palleting, this morning a bag falls from the conveyor belt; the system shuts down. Maasen helps the production crew diagnose the problem and lifts a few bags from the conveyor belt to an adjacent table.

“We’ve learned here: Problems don’t fix themselves,” he explains, noting that the production manager will decide when the system restarts and send a report to the engineer to determine what occurred and how to avoid it. The bag that has fallen on the concrete is discarded and the tabled bags resequenced.

Up next is the star, The Robot, respectfully capitalized because of its high acquisition cost, the costs it’s reducing and the higher efficiency it’s bringing to Ice King.

In the first year of use, the giant swinging arm, manufactured in Japan and reminiscent of a 1960s Godzilla voice-over sci-fi flick, flexes its superhuman potency through high-pressure air and hydraulics. Methodically, effortlessly, “Icezilla” suction-picks a group of bags and places them on a pallet, which has been separately queued and papered by another machine.

As each pallet is filled, based on the size of the bag, it’s then stretch wrapped and conveyed into the freezer room for routing to the delivery docks. Meanwhile, another pallet slips into place as The Robot picks another bag grouping.

“There’s no loss of time in the process,” Maasen says. “Our first scheduled maintenance is about a year out, and it’s already helping with labor costs and reducing the possibility of costly worker’s comp injuries. Stacking ice bags eight hours a day is exhausting, perhaps as much as 65,000 pounds a day of lifting.”

“And,” Maloney notes, with a smile, “the Robot is ready 24 hours a day; it never misses a beat.”

### ALSO STARRING AT ICE KING: ‘THE ROCK’

Maasen and crew are getting crafty with ice.

The ice business, and much of the machinery, may not have changed much in decades, but the industry, as with all others, must innovate or deteriorate.

With this in mind, a new specialty product from the company is “The Rock,” crystal-clear 2x2-inch ice squares that are added to craft drinks at restaurants, bars and private clubs. They should also be available soon in 6- or 12-packs at local spirituous retailers.

A sister product, “The Sphere,” is a 2 ½-inch diameter ball that Ice King will be producing as well in the next few months.

The products add a buck or so to the cost of trending custom

cocktails, but they add to the experience, too, an essential component of that trend, especially among millennials who crave the bustle of creation as well as the buzz of imbibing.

“I love a cup of tea, so I’ll stop by a restaurant and drop ‘The Rock’ in,” Maloney says. “People come over and ask me, ‘What’s that?’ They are simply amazed. ‘Where can I get it?’”

### CRAFTING A BUSINESS

In native Johnston, Iowa, Maasen and his two brothers grew up in a business culture. His dad, Dave, had a plastic-distribution business in nearby Des Moines, his mom a chocolate company in Grimes, also in the area. After school, he worked at her place from age 8 to 18 and tasted the sweet business life.

When his dad asked the eternal paternal question, “What do you want to do?” He responded, “I want to have my own business.”

Following his two brothers to ASU, he worked at the Phoenician Resort part time. One day his dad saw an ad for the sale of a five-year-old ice business in Mesa, and he immediately connected Ryan’s hospitality experience with products such as the 300-pound ice blocks that high-end hotels often acquire for ice sculptures.

In 2004, Ryan acquired Classic Ice, which specialized in solid block ice manufacturing and distribution Valleywide. Two years later, he acquired the ice cube company Arizona Ice, which was in the same building as the original Classic Ice. In 2010, he expanded the company into the current facility with the assistance of Denny Elwell, a friend of his father in Iowa.

“That’s how I started in the business, delivering solid blocks of ice to construction sites,” he says. These remain a company product.

During these early years, he took a call. “I always answer the phone,” he says.

“I represent the Costco stores in Arizona,” the woman said. “How many stores can you handle?”

“Well, let’s start with one,” Maasen replied.

Today, Ice King serves all 18 in the state — a solid piece of its business.

He made the right call.

### THE PHOENIX WATER TAX INCREASES.

On January 9, 2019, the Phoenix City Council reversed its earlier vote, approving a 6-percent water rate increase, effective March 4, and a matching 6-percent water rate increase for 2020.

The city’s Water Services Department justified its request to City Council based on the need to rehabilitate and replace aging infrastructure needs such as pipelines and service lines, pump stations, wells, tanks and reservoirs.

While the city explained that this increase would be nominal for most residential customers, manufacturing companies such as Ice King will be significantly more impacted.

“We had no say in this. We received a small notice in the mail, and that was it,” Maasen says, noting his appreciation to AFMA for speaking against the increase.

“I call it a tax; they call it an increase, and it’s going to get passed on to consumers,” he says. How much at Ice King? “We don’t know yet; we’re backing into it right now, but it will make a difference.”

### EDUCATIONAL, INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITY PRESENCE

Opportunities for learning and innovation flow at Ice King.

In 2017, Maasen met Karl Schultz, then professor of Practice and director of eProjects at ASU Polytechnic Capstone projects at the Mesa campus as well as managing director of ASU Manufacturing



Left to Right  
Tom Maloney – VP Sales  
Ryan Maasen-President

Research and Innovation Hub.

Schultz' job was to network with businesses to find challenging projects for the senior engineering students at the Polytechnic campus. He and his students were invited to the factory. "Our students needed exposure to real-world business challenges, and Ryan had some great ideas on applying technology to make his business more efficient and more profitable," recalls Schultz, now vice president of Professional Services at Scottsdale-based Axon.

How about a robotic ice-cutter to reduce the labor cost for ice squares and spheres? Both require manual labor and the squares work with a potentially dangerous band saw.

The students warmed to Maasen's experience and enthusiasm. The project was so popular it was split into "rock ice" and "spheres" teams.

"While neither project quite got to the 'factory-ready' level, both projects were highlights of our Innovation Showcase and demonstrated some key concepts required for a solution," Schultz says.

Ice King already produces "The Rock," and earlier this year a spherical ice-cube-making machine arrived at Ice King, capable of outputting 3,000 units a day.

Commending AFMA's help in the local food industry, Maasen notes the legislative and peer-sharing benefits of membership. Ice King, for example, is the exclusive ice provider for the annual Golf Classic and manages an Incremental Case Allowance program, which benefits the group's Education Foundation, notes Debbie Roth, AFMA general manager.

Ice King also supports the Valley community by donating ice to nonprofits, charities, churches, community centers and children's sporting programs and events.

Other AFMA members are appreciative.

"Ice King is a great vendor partner. They have always accepted to help with any cause to support the community and they also have gone way beyond with their help with donations to the community," says Kurt Riess, regional vice president, Operations, for Phoenix-based Cardenas Markets, with 55 stores in Arizona, Nevada and California, seven served by Ice King locally. During a recent Valley power outage, for example, the company delivered ice to its stores — after hours and within one hour of the request.

"A few years ago, I ran in Pat's Run and I finished the race thinking, "Why is my bottled water so hot?" Maasen remembers asking himself. As a result, Ice King annually donates ice for the event as well as cash to the Pat Tillman Foundation, honoring the life of the well-known ASU alumnus.

Other favored groups for the company are American Hero Adventures and Make a Wish.

"Just e-mail us for your church, school or organization, and we will consider it," he explains. "If our budget is committed for the year, we will give you our best price."



Left to Right  
Benny Salas – Dispatcher  
Tom Maloney – VP Sales  
Isela Felix-Office Manager  
Ryan Maasen-Président  
David Burgess-Operations Manager

## ARE USDA INSPECTORS COMING DOWN THE ROAD?

Ice King is regularly inspected by the Maricopa County Environmental Health Services Department, and the company contracts with a nearby laboratory to sample test bags weekly for high water-quality standards.

"They'll let the ice melt, then extract some water into vials and test it," says Maloney, a former AFMA employee who met Maasen through the organization. "We don't have to do this, but it's peace of mind for us and something for us to show our customers that their health is foremost."

Maasen believes that USDA inspection of ice manufacturers is imminent, noting that Ice King has built its facility and procedures for this, including FDA registration and aligning with these standards: Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures (SSOP), and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HAACP).

"Some retailers are making their own ice, which may be a risk to the public; many believe these inspections would even the field with one standard, and we are ready," Maasen says. "Ice is the forgotten food, but make no mistake, it is a food."

## LABOR, DELIVERIES, CUSTOMER SERVICE

"In my lifetime, I've never seen inflation like this," Maasen says. Oil increases concern him. Labor, too, especially because of state-mandated minimum-raise increases.

The company is concerned about finding local skilled labor, such as enthusiastic blue-collar people who enjoy manual work or drive trucks, but is confident that that the pool will be deep.

"Most of the young people who work here maybe live within three or five miles, and they know it's hard work here or they wouldn't come in for an interview," Maloney explains. "They're not generally college graduates who may feel they're entitled to start at \$120,000 a year. We're looking for those who want to learn and advance themselves and who embrace our family business culture."

Of concern, too, is the cost of deliveries. The company trains its own drivers, helping them through local driver schools for the Class A licenses required on the big rigs.

The company recently acquired \$1.5 million of new Kenworth trucks for large retail deliveries. And, the Ice King Distribution division, led by its president Art Gomez, provides separate "hot shot" deliveries for events, construction sites and for some of the company's approximately 500 Ice King ice merchandisers statewide.

These large units typically appear at retailers, allowing consumers to grab ice bags and cart them. In the second quarter of this year, Ice King's pallet-loadable ice merchandisers will be appearing at area retailers such as Costco to better serve them as well as their customers.

"With our patented pallet loaders, we will be able to directly load ice bags into the ice merchandisers, or our retail partners can do this," Maasen says. "Either way, delivery efficiency will be significantly increased."

Maintaining this superior customer service — why Ice King exists, Maasen and Maloney emphasize — will continue to challenge the company. Because of high-delivery costs, for example, Ice King has considered outsourcing this. But will the contracted company care as much about their customers as it does? "The answer is 'No,'" Maasen says.

Jared Porter, general manager for the Buck & Rider | Abby's Oyster Bar in Phoenix, part of LGO Hospitality, purchases "The Rock" and is enthusiastic about Ice King's products and services. "They deliver consistent product," he says, "provide specialty items, are attentive with deliveries and help with various seafood events throughout the year."

"My dad told me when I was growing up, 'If you don't have the service, you might as well have nothing,'" Maasen recalls. "That's core to us: We exist to serve our customers."

Especially in summer, when ice glimmers like gold.

"We are ready," Maasen says. "There are no vacations here July 4th."