

# New Orleans CITY BUSINESS

## Company builds on success of Crawfish Monica

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Since 1981, Kajun Kettle Foods Inc. owners Monica Davidson-Hilzem and Pierre “Pete” Hilzem have grown their food manufacturing business from their Kenner kitchen table to an 86,000-square-foot production facility in Elmwood.



The staff and leadership of Kajun Kettle Foods Inc. is best known for Crawfish Monica, the longtime staple of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. (Photo by Ashley Merlin)

Their customers include grocery stores, restaurants and festivals in Louisiana and five states.

Their best-known product: Crawfish Monica, the spicy cream sauce and pasta dish that has

been a longtime staple of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

The business was recently named the 2013 Small Business of the Year by the Jefferson Parish Economic Development Commission for its longevity and the \$1.8 million in charitable food donations it has given to organizations.

Kajun Kettle Foods’ founders recently discussed their growth and how catering Jazz Fest has prepared them to be the official Emergency Feeder for the State of Louisiana.

**Q: You seem to have large presence for a company with 34 employees.**

Pete: We’ve learned how to do more with fewer employees. We try not to be top heavy; it kills on overhead. We’ve gone through several business cycles, years of growth and years of no growth, and it’s been an interesting road... You have to learn to do as much as you can with what you’ve got or you get killed.

**Monica:** Our production facility is around 86,000 square feet... a lot of equipment was already here, so we've been able to become more mechanized than before. We have a lot more room to do things like conveyer belt systems... We consider ourselves a big business because we have a lot of people to look after to make sure we're serving their needs.

**CB:** Most people are familiar with festival presence, but besides that what other markets have you ventured into over the years?

**Monica:** We've grown a whole lot, and we have a lot more to do... We're going into newstates, with new brokers and new distributors, and are doing more retail. We also do emergency feeding for the state after storms and emergency situations.



**CB:** How'd you get involved with emergency feeding? Is it hard to juggle that with the company's other client responsibilities?

**Pete:** That was kind of what we were involved in doing around the storm (Hurricane Katrina)... Because of what we know from Jazz Fest, and our experience with large-scale catering, we know how to set up and create systems to feed people where not much infrastructure exists. We could get a call at 9 p.m. tonight and have to get to work. And we do get paid for that.

**Monica:** One of the biggest experiments we had was after the BP oil spill when we put in a whole catering unit for responders and clean-up crews. We catered around for around 400 people, seven days a week, from 4:30 a.m. to 2 a.m. for nine months. (Emergency feeding) affects business in unpredictable ways sometimes... It ebbs and flows and other sides of the business hinge around that.

**CB:** JEDCO reports that you experienced 20 percent sales growth last year? How was this achieved?

**Monica:** Our client base we were able to work with grew quite a bit, pulled us with them. We've been successful enough with them on a local scale, and when they grew regionally we grew with them. We're even negotiating a fleet-wide move with one brand and that would put us into all the stores they own, over 900 grocery stores.

We also do a lot of business with chain restaurants and some of them have grown a huge amount, at least 20 percent.

**Pete:** (Growing the retail sector) is a long term process... You can't just throw products out there and hope it sells. It's easy to get it into stores and onto shelves but the hard thing is getting the products into the shopping baskets. We do a lot of food shows, and make calls to restaurant groups... that helps stimulate sales.

I think one of the great mysteries of life is how one grows a retail brand. It's so complex and so dependent on so many things. I don't understand it. I'm a chef. We do a lot of work on the hot side of grocery store, ready-made items, and that I understand.

**CB: You've been in business for 32 years so you're obviously doing something right. What advice can you give to newer businesses?**

**Monica:** When you get knocked down get back up. We're stubborn, so just hanging in there, and seeking advice from others in business is so important. Experiment and try new things. Don't be afraid to fail... It's about hanging in there.

We probably made 25 cents at our first year of Jazz Fest. We could've quit after that but we didn't and now it's a very big, nice piece of business we do. We never would have gotten there if we gave up after the first or second year because it wasn't as lucrative we thought it would be.

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