

Loubat Equipment Co.

New Orleans – Dealer

Look closely at the outside of Loubat Equipment Co. in the heart of the Mid-City neighborhood in New Orleans, and you can still see the faded yellow line where the floodwaters from Hurricane Katrina rose and fell. Now, fuzzy, green caterpillars inch up and down the exterior walls, a sign of life and metamorphosis, symbolizing the 133-year-old dealership's perseverance through one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history.

At the front door of the office building and warehouse, an "X" marks the spot, indicating that military personnel inspected the building in the humid days after the summer 2005 storm. A "zero" means no one in the building perished, but not every door around town had that stamp. Nearly three years later, so many "X's" still pervade — some on homes long since abandoned or populated with FEMA trailers, and others on boarded-up stores. For many, and particularly Henri "Fritz" Louapre, Loubat's chairman and co-owner, and a NOLA native, the "X" represents a permanent reminder of how not to forget, but yet, still move forward.

"We're thinking of hiring an artist to create an iron or metal 'X' that we can leave on our doors," Louapre says casually, but his words are a metaphor for the impressive challenges his company has overcome. The first foodservice equipment dealership in New Orleans to garner so much of the restaurant capital's business, and the first business to open in its neighborhood after Katrina, Loubat has proven to be a leader in the E&S world (the dealer ranked 99th on *FE&S*' 2008 Distribution Giants ranking), and even beyond as an inspiration to all organizations facing major obstacles. For this reason and other reasons, *FE&S* named Loubat Equipment Co. as the co-winner for the 2008 Top Achiever-Dealer Award.

Back in 1875, Hillaire Loubat founded the Loubat Glassware & Cork Co., which later merged with L. Frank, a broadline food distributor where current owners Christine Briede (president), Cam McCall (vice president) and Doug Tyler (outside sales and treasurer) worked at the time. In the late '80s, the Loubat L. Frank Co. split into two, with Loubat Equipment Co. focusing on commercial cooking equipment and becoming the dealership it is today. Louapre had already been working for the company the others joined.

"When I started at Loubat in 1993, the company was only doing about \$2 million in sales, and now it's a little over \$7 million," says Briede, the majority owner of Loubat who, as president, oversees everything from sales to marketing to administrative duties. But, she says, she doesn't

run the company alone. Witnessing the interaction between the four company leaders, it's evident they've been close friends, or even like family, in addition to longtime business partners.

"We work together by playing on each of our strengths," Briede says. "I'm very organized and I have a marketing background, so sales and marketing was a natural fit for me. Cam is strong in operations so that's where his main responsibilities lie, Fritz heads up the engineering department as his forte, and Doug excels at street sales, working closely with our top clients like Dickie Brennan's and other restaurants and hotels in the French Quarter."

Housing a staff of 19, the Loubat building consists of office space and a 22,000-square-foot warehouse stocked with equipment, supplies and furniture. Just beyond the front door, a cash-and-carry room stocked with kitchen accessories, electronics, knives and other supplies where people from all walks of the community stop by.

When Katrina hit in August 2005, the cash-and-carry room was first to go. "It was a mess, we had to clean everything out and threw a lot of supplies away," Briede says. But, she says, they were lucky. Set above ground, floodwaters didn't enter the building. Water damage occurred when the roof, windows and doors gave way to the hurricane winds.

The group weathered the storm in Baton Rouge, La., returning to the office on Oct. 3. Coming back, Briede describes the scene as similar to a sepia photograph. The flood water was so muddy and dirty that when it receded, it stained the buildings brown, she says. There were no green leaves or grass, only the brown of dying tree trunks and shrubbery that once was. "The water just killed everything," Briede says. "It looked like a war zone."

Loubat was the first business to come back to the area, breathing a sign of life to the area where many other businesses and residents had abandoned their homes.

During mold removal and other cleanup, the Loubat team sat huddled together at desks piled in the middle of the room. "We worked like that for about a year," Briede says, who now enjoys a window office with a feng shui design, which has helped put smiles on everyone's faces.

Worse than trashed offices was the communication problem, Briede says. With phone companies slow to get the city back online, employees relied on their cell phones. The main line was forwarded to Briede's home phone answering machine. She says the company was lucky to have internet access in just a couple weeks after the storm when a lot of other companies waited much longer.



(Left to right) Vice President Cam McCall, President Christine Briede, Outside Sales/Treasurer Doug Tyler and Chairman Henri Louapre.

It took a full year and then some for the company to receive insurance reimbursements, and again they were luckier than the majority of NOLA folks. Insurance continues to plague the city, Briede says, which she believes has contributed to slow construction efforts and housing market woes.

"Going through what we went through, it really makes you appreciate what you have," Briede says. "We really appreciate one another a lot more, too. When everything's taken away from you, you don't know what your future is going to be like. When you slowly start to get your life back to some sense of normalcy, you're very grateful."

Before the storm hit, Loubat was easily known as the major equipment dealer in town, with high-profile clients like Dooky Chase's, Café Adelaide and the Dickie Brennan restaurants. Loubat has also outfitted acclaimed Chef John Besh's restaurants August and Luke.

Loubat has acted like an aid worker for the foodservice world, helping so many restaurants get back on their feet when they needed to most. The company closely supported Dickie Brennan, when his steakhouse's lower-level kitchen suffered extensive flood damage.

"Things are still difficult for a lot of our clients because they're having trouble getting employees and if they find them, it costs them a lot more to hold onto them," Briede says. "The seats just aren't being filled like they used to."

At the moment, Loubat's restaurant work makes up about 23 percent of its business, with 30 percent of business coming from general contract work. After that, the dealership's business is a mix of work with hotels, caterers, churches, government agencies, and schools and hospitals, which Briede foresees being the next avenue.

"I'm predicting schools and hospitals are going to be a big growth market for us because a lot of them are still closed and will need to come back online at some point," she says.

Outside of the office, Loubat continues to support the community, donating equipment and gift bags for culinary events.

Briede says the Loubat team remains more focused on the short term for now. "We've always had long-term goals, but after Katrina, it's like let's just take one foot at a time." Even if that one foot really is one giant step after another.