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Frozen Dessert Retailers' Hall of Fame

Andrew Seabury, President, GTI Designs Group

Andrew Seabury, Dessert Professional's honoree for the Frozen Dessert Retailers Hall of Fame, is the founder and President of GTI Designs Group, a design and consulting service for food service operations. According to Seabury, GTI, which he founded in 1993, can handle everything for their clients, from designing the space to supplying and installing equipment and displays for both front and back of the house, or clients can choose the services they want on an a la carte basis. Following is a short Q&A with Andrew Seabury.

Congratulations on your twenty years in commercial design. Why did you start the business? The inspiration really came from my trips to Europe and, in particular, Italy. It seemed incredible too me that each pasticceria/café/gelateria/chocolate store/restaurant was so inspired by design and look, but these were often built in buildings that were many, many hundreds of years old. This lead me to research how these stores were designed and built. This, in turn, lead me to discover the European methods of modular design, which essentially gave these stores a custom look but were assembled from component, pre-built and modular pieces but with customized finishes to clients requests. This lead to the "lightbulb" moment – why is this not being done in the USA?? 20 years later, here we are successfully applying these techniques to the industry, and the rest is history.

How many frozen dessert retail stores have you designed/built? As a group, we have done over 500 stores/projects of varying degrees and sizes from Whole Foods to countless single-store owners.

What are some of the biggest challenges in bringing a concept to reality? The challenges of today are often to try to meet the vision of our clients with the reality the current economic climate has created. For many of our customers, the availability of capital is not what it was five or six years ago. With GTI investing in its ability to manufacture locally, we were able to meet those challenges head on – providing value while still offering our commitment to attractive European inspired design. Logistics always present unique challenges, with GTI having built stores all throughout North America, Canada – from Alaska to Houston, New York to San Francisco and as far away as London and Caribbean, our installation team has been able to figure the most effective way to build the store. Whether closing down Las Vegas boulevard to crane gelato and pastry cases and equipment into the second floor of the Caesars Palace Casino, or building a café at Antigua's airport and having containers of the equipment shipped from the local port to the location, each challenge is always different but needs to be solved to meet our customers needs.

You design a wide variety of establishments. Is there a guideline/philosophy that you bring to every project? Our goal is to provide the best information and advice possible through the design stage, to provide opinion and expertise to try to extract the maximum potential return on our clients' investments.

What's your favorite part of the job? Walking into a store that you designed and built and seeing people in that store enjoying the experience – seeing the ideas turning into reality. It never gets old when you go into a store that started as a conversation or meeting with a client.

How has industry changed since you founded your business? Initially, we saw ourselves as pioneers trying to create a niche market – European design inspired with the need for American practicality. We were trying find the customer who understood this. Now there is a great understanding of our concept, and design and look married with practicality is where the customer wants to be. As the world began to shrink, the niche began to grow. There is far more opportunity today – the growth of the artisanal, hands-on professional, inspired by quality in our industry, is hugely helpful in our success. And, of course, the ability to get information to your clients, promote your business via mediums such as the internet has created the national opportunities that we see today.

What are some of the biggest mistakes made by those who serve as their own design/construction consultants and general contractors? They fall in love with a location without actually seeing if it's right for their particular idea. They very often never consider how to operate the store from a flow of the customer to the work space of the employee – you do not want a store that needs 10 people to operate it, when a good design can use three. The single biggest mistake: they cannot get the equipment through the front or back door!

What advice do you have for a chef or restaurateur looking to open a frozen dessert retail business? Do your due diligence, look at the location's traffic patterns and demographics, be honest about your budget and strike the balance between design and functionality. The margins are great, but never compromise on quality and good customer service (customer service costs you nothing).

What is your favorite flavor of ice cream or gelato? I always start with the nut flavors – hazlenut, pistachio – but I just had a fantastic pesto gelato – the basil was infused into the base and it was insane.

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