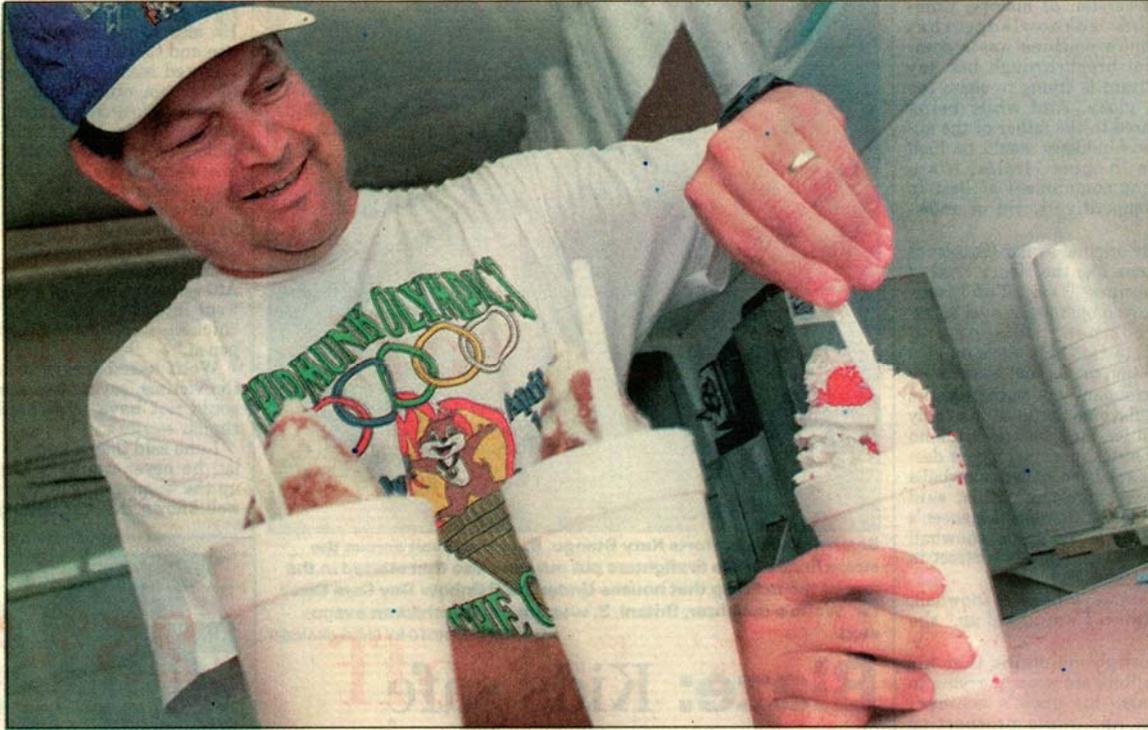


# That's Snow business

By Dante Ramos



**Earl Gervais fixes some fancy snowballs at Lil Kastle in Metairie. Like most area stands, Lil Kastle uses an Ortolano SnoWizard machine.**

## **Nephew gives credit to his uncle: SnoWizard history displayed.**

Despite its wooden body and bathroom-style door latch, the snowball machine George Ortolano devised in 1937 isn't much different from the stainless-steel models on the market today: A basic electric motor turns metal blades that shave tiny flakes from a large block of ice.

"Frankly, the machine functionally operates just the same," said Ronnie Sciortino, who is Ortolano's nephew and runs SnoWizard, the company Ortolano founded.

Still, Sciortino insists the snowball, the syrupy flavored-ice confection perfected in New Orleans, has a rich history that is worth commemorating. And because Ortolano invented the SnoWizard, the best-known brand of snowball machine, his nephew says that history and Ortolano's life story are inextricably linked.

That's why Sciortino is assembling old photographs, blueprints and machines into a small museum at SnoWizard's headquarters on River Road in old Jefferson, near the Orleans Parish line. He has hired a New Orleans artist to build displays for the machines. He said the museum likely will open by August.



**Ortolano, in front of his Magazine Street grocery store in 1937, built the snowball machine as a way to attract customers to his store, his nephew says.**

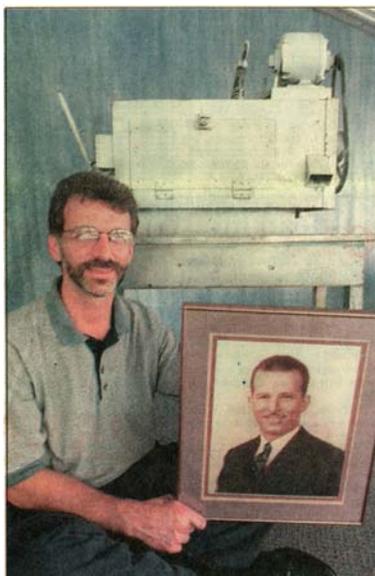
Visitors will learn that Ortolano, who died in January, invented his snowball machine in his garage as a way of improving business at a store he owned at Magazine and Delachaise streets in New Orleans.

“He had a grocery store and was just looking for a way to make some money,” Sciortino said.

But the machines became popular. Ortolano, who learned to weld as a shipbuilder during World War II, began to manufacture them from metal, first from galvanized steel and later largely from stainless steel. Successive models of the machine, which Ortolano almost called the Ice Commando, show other subtle changes.

Some homespun touches, including hinges designed for maritime use, disappeared as Ortolano refined the machine. He improved the legs. And after initially naming the machine “Snow Wizard,” he eventually dropped the first “w.”

Sciortino credits his uncle with promoting snowballs at school fairs and other events and supplanting snow cones, an older product made from crushed ice. According to Sciortino, Ortolano also coined the term “snowball” for a shaved ice dessert and the variant spelling “SnoBall.”



**George Ortolano’s nephew Ronnie Sciortino holds a picture of his uncle and the very first SnoWizard snowball machine. The working machine was built in 1937 for use in his grocery store.**

Indeed, Sciortino maintains that Ortolano essentially invented the snowball. "It all started here," he said, indicating the 1937 machine.

Excerpt from Ramos, Dante. "That's Snow Business." *The Times-Picayune* June 28, 1997. B1, B2.

Photo credit: John McCusker