

Caterer in Charlotte, North Carolina Invents Cordless Food Warmer

CHARLOTTE - As founder and owner for 32 years of SMS Catering of Charlotte, Bob Freeman has accomplished a lot in his life. He was District Assistant (1972-1984) to U.S. Congressman Jim Martin (later, Governor Martin in North Carolina). He was a high school teacher and guidance counselor after graduating with majors in psychology and social studies from Western Carolina University. Bob was also first president and co-founder of the National Barbeque Association. Now, Freeman at 60, can add "Inventor" to his resume. He's marketing a problem-solver for the entire catering industry.

Freeman, this week, placed the Freeman Cordless Portable Food Warmer on the market through a new company he formed, SMS Industries. The machine, manufactured in Waxhaw, a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina, at Sheet Metal Specialties, uses small propane gas canisters and time-tested design to keep foods hot in locales inside or outside.

"There are so many times when you need a warmer not powered by electricity," he said. "People hold parties under tents, on the beach or in parking lots. And food exhibitors sometimes have to pay a lot of money to hook up to electricity in convention centers and display halls. Using one-pound propane canisters gives you a lot of mobility and a whole lot of convenience."

Chef Bernhard Spogat of Sharin' Foodservice Sales, headquartered near Charlotte, wants the warmer for its utility outside and inside. "I'm going to talk to the company about getting a couple," he said. "We do events on golf courses and other places outside," he said. "And during food shows, you always have to find an electrical outlet, then grit your teeth hoping the power won't go off when 50 or 60 food brokers turn on warmers at the same time."

Charlottean Tom Muller is another food-service veteran—35 years in the business. He said, "People want warmers that are practical, easy, convenient and safe — a warmer that does the job it's supposed to do and meets all the rules and regulations. Bob's unit does that, and it's attractive, too."

The Freeman Portable Cordless Food Warmer began life as a series of drawings five years ago after Freeman and his son, Robert, suffered embarrassment. Here's how Freeman tells it: "In October of 1997, we were providing a fish fry for the Charlotte Association of Realtors in the parking lot at their office. There's nothing better than fish when it's just out of the pan. So, we're cooking it and putting it on the line. It was pretty chilly that day, and within minutes on the line, it was not fit to eat."

The chill and the wind and the frustration got Freeman to thinking serious about an idea that had tickled the back of his mind for years. "Within a week, I started drawing rough designs. I wanted something with radiant heat that would keep food hot even if it was chilly and breezy."

Freeman applied years of practice to his brainchild. It had to be light for portability. It weighs 32 pounds. It had to have an easy fuel source. Propane gas cylinders are available at hardware, grocery and convenience stores. It had to have staying power. Each small gas cylinder lasts about four hours and costs around \$2.70.

And it had to have economy because caterers and food distributors have been as strapped by the recession as other businesses. The price is \$1895.00.

His son, Robert, also an executive in the catering business, helped.

"We'd work on it every couple of months when we had time," the elder Freeman said. "And we thought about it constantly. Those times between sitting down to figure out things were incubator periods when ideas just came. Last summer, we were ready. We took our drawings on graph paper to Sheet Metal Specialties and they did final designs for us, subtracting an inch here or adding an inch there. We got a prototype in September."

After testing the warmer at his company's events and a bit more revising, the unit was pronounced ready for market. "There are millions of people in food service, and what surprises me is that no one else has made available a warmer like this," Freeman said. "I guess people are just so busy that they don't have time to put ideas on paper and see them through."

Bob Freeman had occasional time because his catering firm has reached a level of maturity that some things run themselves. SMS handled 900 events in 2000 and, as the economy cooled, 750 in 2001. The Duke University party at the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament in Charlotte is one of almost 120 events so far in 2002. Decades in food service served Freeman well during design.

"I don't have an engineering degree or experience in engineering," he said, "but to me, the warmer isn't that complex. I've been working with gas and high pressure and low pressure and regulators and vales for 30 years."

Catering the Judge Advocate General's JAGFest on September 1, 1979, in Washington, DC, is an event Freeman enjoys talking about. "Look at this," he says, holding a flyer for the event. And there it is, tongue in cheek as can be:

"Old Fashioned North Carolina barbecue. Will be catered by internationally famous pigpicker Bob Freeman."

Before long, however, the name "Freeman" may be ubiquitous at food events all over the country. And it'll be known for a mighty fine food warmer instead of for pickin' a pig.