

## Baking safety into a Disney holiday tradition

12/06/2011

By Lauren Salisbury

There's something about Chef Erich Herbitschek that's reminiscent of Santa Claus.

Maybe it's the caring ear he lends his team when they ask about bake times. Or maybe it's the jolly spirit he exudes when discussing the recipes he uses from his home village of Falkenstein, Austria.

But perhaps most of all, it's the gift he leaves Guests every year in the lobby of Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa at the Walt Disney World Resort – a 16-foot-tall gingerbread house made of sugar and spice and a whole lot of pixie dust.



The lobby gingerbread house at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa has been a favorite with Guests and Cast Members since it debuted in 1999.

Since 1999, Erich and his team have delighted Guests from around the world with a sweet-smelling display that doubles as a retail shop selling gingerbread, cookies and many other holiday delights.

Earlier this year, with several safety enhancements planned for the annual project, the resort's executive pastry chef worried the changes would spoil his recipe for success.

"I was kind of concerned, originally," he said of modifications made to the construction and decoration phases. "I thought this would mean many more hours of building."

Yet despite his worries, the enhancements not only helped his team finish the house safely, they also allowed for the work to be completed in record time.



Executive Pastry Chef Erich Herbitschek and Michelle Demarest of Safety Services worked together to make this year's gingerbread house a safety success.

The process begins with construction workers assembling the wooden pieces that make up the Victorian-style house, which was inspired by a child's dollhouse. Next, the resort's Bakery team steps in to cover it with thousands of edible decorations, plus shingles and trim made of gingerbread, under Erich's direction.

Because more than 5,000 pieces of gingerbread are required to cover the exterior, pastry chefs must access several hard-to reach areas high above the lobby floor. This year, a sturdy platform was added to the house's second "floor" to allow Cast Members to reach the nooks and crannies more safely. As an extra precaution, cables and handrails were added to provide fall protection.



The new platform allowed pastry chefs to more safely decorate the roof.

On the ground, scaffolding replaced stepladders for decoration of the lower walls.

"We made scaffolding that was very specific to the house," said Michelle Demarest of Safety Services. "This allowed them to perform their job more safely."



Scaffolding provides greater protection than ladders.

"Michelle was really great," Erich said of the partnership. "She showed us what could happen [if we worked without safety precautions], and her changes make a lot of sense."

Michelle also created a scaffolding training program specific to the one-of-a-kind structure.



Erich and his team continue to make safety a priority.

Erich said the experience has forever changed his attitude.

"Instead of being negative about safety, I learned to observe and listen," he said. "I want my Cast Members to be safe, and when you put the proper safety precautions in place, it makes the whole experience less stressful."