Artisan is real good at fake food

Her sculpted delicacies adorn museums.

By Rita Giordano
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Pay a visit to Sandy Levens’ Haddon Township home, and it doesn’t take long to suss something a little different going on. Like, say, the 25 slabs of bacon, 10 hams, and a whole heap of ham hocks hanging from big metal racks in the middle of her living room.

“I know Martha Stewart wouldn’t approve, but it is what it is,” Levens said with a playful shrug.

There is, however, a fly in the meat. The meats monopolizing the sitting room are made of plaster and papier-mâché. Levens created them all.

Levens is a faux-food artisan. She creates real-looking, period-correct fake food for display in museums and at historic sites. She is also very good at it. For the third year in a row, she is listed in the Directory of Traditional American Crafts in the August edition of Early American Life magazine. Artisans apply and are judged by experts like museum curators and scholars. Only the best make it into the directory.

See ARTISAN on A4

Artisan

Continued from A1

She remembers the first year she was selected.

“I was over the moon,” Levens said. “Early American Life is like the bible of 18th-century material culture.”

But with that first entry, she was so nervous and uncertain, she dared tell only one friend besides her husband, Hoag.

That she would find a business in faux food, not to mention accolades, is nothing she would have guessed when she started about a dozen years ago.

“I don’t have any formal art training at all,” Levens said.

She has always gardened but was not a big crafter. One other thing: She hates to cook.

But she loves history, and when she joined the board of the Camden County Historical Society in 2000 — she is now president — she felt Pomona Hall, a former mansion of the Cooper family in Camden which the society oversees, needed some jazzing up.

During a visit to Winterthur in Delaware, she was impressed by the faux food that was part of the presentation. She made inquiries and finally got in touch with Jane Ann Hornberger, at the time part of Winterthur’s education department who made its faux food.

Hornberger graciously met with Levens, showed her pieces, and shared materials information. It was the start of a mentoring relationship and a friendship.

Levens’ maiden sojourn into faux food was oysters. She used real oyster shells, painstakingly cleaned, and a kind of clay made by Crayola called Model Magic. They were a success, but she still had her day job — her own business doing medical-research research for lawyers.

But then came tort reform, and lawyers increasingly hired doctors to do research and act as consultants and experts.

“I realized I had to reinvent myself,” Levens said.

Hoag, a photographer and journalist, made a picture book of her creations, and she sent it to museums and historic sites.

Her work has gotten around. She made faux fish in mustard sauce for Mount Vernon, George Washington’s estate on the Potomac. That is also where the smoked-meat models hanging in her living room will end up. Monticello has some of her hams, Independence National Historical Park’s Deshler-Morris House in Germantown got chickens and cucumbers. For Manhattan’s Lower East Side Tenement Museum, she created pickled pig’s feet with latex molds she made using real pig’s feet.

Awaiting shipment for a Civil War-era exhibit at Arkansas’s Fort Smith National Historic Park are salt pork, hardtack biscuits, and, for that extra touch of reality, maggots. The curator asked for them.

Levens has become something of an expert in food and dining of the 18th and 19th centuries. It goes with the territory. She has amassed many old cookbooks for research, not for cooking. (“No, no! Oh, please.”)

She also has gotten to know her materials. Her clients depend on it. Using real food could result in vermin that might gnaw on art and artifacts. In addition, decaying organic material gives off gases that can damage exhibited materials. So does Styrofoam; she lets it sit a few years before using it.

There’s more than a bit of whimsy to what she does, and that’s not lost on Levens, who has fabricated food as big as a boar’s end and as small as a pea.

But she views it as a privilege as well.

“I am humbled,” the artisan said, “that people that trust me to do this kind of work.”

Contact Rita Giordano at 856-779-5893, rgiordano@phillynews.com or on Twitter @ritagiordano.