

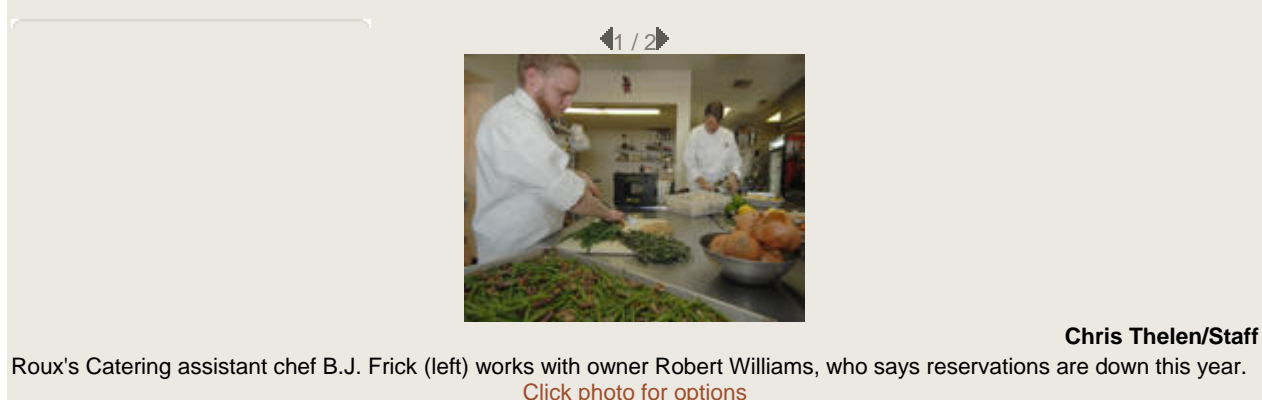
Masters Week business could go into rough

Hotels, caterers report noticeable drop in bookings

By **Stephanie Toone** | Staff Writer

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Local business owners will soon find out whether the Masters Tournament is recession-proof.



The picture isn't looking too rosy for some so far.

Some local caterers, hoteliers and others in the hospitality industry are expecting at least a 10 percent decrease in business for the first full week in April because of the uncertain economic times.

Jugal Purohit, who owns four area hotels, including Country Inn and Suites and Ramada Inn, said his corporate client business during the Masters is taking a big hit. He said bookings for his hotels for the practice rounds are way down.

"Our corporate America people are just sending out their people for the main tournament," Mr. Purohit said. "They're cutting costs left and right, so the Masters is a part of that."

Robert Williams, the owner of Roux's Catering, said his catering engagements are down about 20 percent from this time last year. He also attributes the decline to corporations' cutbacks.

"This is going to have to be a year where a lot of us just buckle our seat belts and prepare for the ride," Mr. Williams said. "I don't expect it to be one of the better years for the Masters."

A typical Masters Week has an economic impact estimated in the millions for local businesses. The last economic impact statement on the Masters, put out by the Augusta Convention and Visitors Bureau in 1997, estimated the tournament pumped \$109 million into the local economy.

Some companies are making adjustments to fit the new economic reality. Executive Marketing Services, which provides housing, catering and transportation to Masters visitors, will offer services at a lower price this year, said Chris Cheek, the company's vice president.

So far, bookings for services for the practice rounds are down, he said.

Business is coming in slowly, but it will come, said Stan Creswell, the general manager of Hampton Inn on Washington Road. Reservations there are down about 10 percent, but he said many might wait until the last minute.

Mr. Williams said he still expects the Masters to draw thousands of people, even if they have a tighter grip on their pocketbooks.

"Any money's going to stimulate our economy, so I'm still really looking forward to it," he said.

The Partridge Inn has managed to buck the trend, general manager Jeff Brower said. The upscale hotel has been booked since August for the Masters.

With rooms starting at \$800 for Masters Week, Partridge Inn customers are paying for more than a place to stay, he said.

"It's about the look, the feel and the quality of the staff," Mr. Brower said. "I think that's helped us weather some of this."

Sue Parr, the president of the Augusta Chamber of Commerce, said the Masters Housing Bureau, which it runs, has seen a slight increase in homeowners interested in renting.

"We are seeing flexibility from homeowners in their rental fees," she said in an e-mail.

One of those is Laurie Easterlin, who has rented her Skinner Mill Road home for years but has not found a taker this year. Her home is renting for 25 percent less than it has in years past.

"This is the first year we've had trouble renting," she said. "We're hoping for the best."

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