

Restaurateur Restores St. Louis Park Drive-In

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) —



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For years, Steve Schussler has been the creative dynamo behind such massive, eye-popping restaurant concepts as Rainforest Cafe and T-Rex: A Prehistoric Family Adventure.

But near his St. Louis Park home, Schussler has taken on what his associates are calling a small "labor of love." In late April, the Twin Cities businessman bought the dilapidated Wagner's Drive-In; he's spending about \$850,000 to renovate and rebrand the restaurant as "Galaxy Drive In."

By one measure, his investment in the old drive-in is a mere speck of hamburger grease. His restaurant company, Schussler Creative Inc., spent \$15 million to build its 20,000 square-foot T-Rex restaurant, which opened three years ago in Kansas City, Kan.

By another yardstick, however, Schussler's spending on the Galaxy Drive In is huge. The restaurant is only 550 square feet, sits on a one-acre lot and may not produce a profit for several years.

But then, Schussler contends that the Galaxy Drive In makeover isn't really about the money. It's more a "spiritual" quest to preserve a bit of Americana, now giving the drive-in a retro futuristic makeover.

Through the years, Schussler has grown to know the drive-in, 3712 Quebec Ave. S., as a gathering and dining place for families and friends. It's a place where Schussler has seen kids play Frisbee with their dogs while waiting for their burgers.

"I believe we have saved an icon in St. Louis Park that was dying," said Schussler, 54.

Founded in 1951, the drive-in restaurant was first known as the Dairy Mor, operating with car hops and selling burgers for 20 cents, hot dogs for a dime and pop for a nickel apiece. Since then,

the restaurant has changed hands several times with its themes including "Buds Big Boy, "Oak Hill Drive-In" and most recently Wagner's Drive-In.

About eight years ago, Alan and Jayne Wohl bought the restaurant from two food brokers. The Wohls built up the restaurant, gaining one magazine's distinction in 2003 as serving the Twin Cities' best burgers.

Since then, however, the Wohls have struggled with the restaurant, unable to pay for necessary updates to the building or its equipment, Jayne Wohl said. In April, they sold the business to Schussler.

"I feel she (the restaurant) needs a facelift," she admitted.

Wohl isn't walking away from the restaurant; Schussler Creative has hired her as Galaxy's general manager and is training her in its restaurant operations. One of the changes for Wohl will be working with a new point-of-sale system, making it easier and more efficient to ring up sales.

"It's been like going from one galaxy to another," Wohl, 54, said of her business training. "I am going from pushing a pencil and adding up numbers in my head to going to Steven Schussler university."

Wohl said it was tough to sell her business. But she said she's grateful for the chance to rejuvenate her career: "As long as I follow the rules, I can be ... expansive and creative."

Just as he has kept the restaurant's former owner, Schussler has endeavored to preserve the flavor of the old Wagner's Drive-In. The restaurant still has part of its original floor and roof. The drive-in will also have carhops working with old-fashioned silver manual coin changers. The rest of the structure and site has been retooled with new bathrooms, kitchen equipment, parking lot and outdoor seating.

But there are plenty of new touches, as well. Schussler said he and his company did plenty of research to bring the old Wagner Drive-In up to date.

"We went to every drive-in in the state," he noted.

Among the creative touches Schussler is adding: A giant lawn chess set, decorative water fountains, two antique juke boxes and a skateboard and scooter rack. Some of the drive-in's stone benches will be composed of 3.6 billion-year-old Morton gneiss, reportedly Minnesota's oldest formation of exposed bedrock. And there will be an outdoor fire pit where patrons can roast marshmallows to create their own s'mores.

The drive-in will also sell s'mores kits with two-foot-long roasting sticks, large marshmallows, chocolate and graham crackers.

"I love doing things that are fun," Schussler said.

As for the restaurant's menu, Schussler Creative is taking the best of its food items, including burgers and fries, and adding a few of its own choice selections, said Jeff Bornmann, company chief development officer. The drive-in will have a staff of about 35 employees, including uniformed car hops and Roller Derby-style skaters to direct traffic in and out of the restaurant.

"We will have to make that (traffic) work to be good neighbors," Bornmann said.

Another twist: The drive-in is encouraging patrons to bring their dogs, whimsically noting in its marketing that the Galaxy will be a place where "aliens, humans and all of our four-legged friends are welcome." The canine components will include a menu (i.e. dog bones, treats and doggie vanilla ice creams cones when accompanied by a person) and a water fountain just for dogs.

Meanwhile, residents Gay Neitzel and Jay Coleman, who live across the street from the restaurant, said they are happy Schussler is restoring and upgrading the drive-in.

"I think it is going to be a fun place," Neitzel said.

By SCOTT CARLSON
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