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Schussler Creative Inc. staff, from left, George Meredith, Jeff Bornmann (on bass), Kari Honoroff, founder Steven Schussler, and Kim Anderson (piano) play the parts on a mock-up of Aerobleu.

New Schussler concept will open in Las Vegas

BY JOHN VOMHOF JR.
STAFF WRITER

Steven Schussler is known for his larger-than-life themed restaurant concepts, so it's only fitting that his next project will be in Las Vegas.

Schussler, founder and CEO of Golden Valley-based Schussler Creative Inc., has signed a letter of intent to open a restaurant called Aerobleu at New York-New York Hotel & Casino next summer. The hotel is located at the corner of Las Vegas Boulevard and Tropicana Avenue, one of the city's busiest intersections.

Schussler Creative will spend between \$10 million and

\$12 million to build Aerobleu, with financial backing from Kansas City, Mo.-based mall developer Red Development. The restaurant will include an 8,500-square-foot bar and dining area inside the casino, plus a patio area with outdoor seating for about 200 people at the base of the hotel's replica of the Statue of Liberty.

"Other than Disney World, I don't think there's any place in the country that could afford us more business or exposure," said Schussler, who also created the elaborate Rainforest Cafe and T-Rex concepts.

Aerobleu is based on the 1997 book *Aerobleu Pilot's*

SCHUSSLER | PAGE 31

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31

SCHUSSLER: Themed eatery will be at New York-New York Hotel & Casino

FROM PAGE 1

Journal, in which a fictitious character named Max Morgan runs a jazz club called Aerobleu in Paris between 1939 and 1959. In the book, Morgan wins a DC-3 airplane in an all-night poker game, then travels to New York, London, New Orleans and Havana with jazz icons such as Miles Davis and Max Roach.

Schussler bought the restaurant licensing rights to the book five years ago and has been developing the concept since.

"I read the book and became immensely interested in it," Schussler said. "I thought, 'Why don't we make the restaurant and bar from the book come to life?'"

Like Schussler's other concepts, Aerobleu will be extravagant. The restaurant's interior will feature a replica DC-3, with the wing serving as a stage for live musicians. Outside, a saxophonist will play on the roof of a refurbished 1940s New York taxi in front of the Statue of Liberty; his image will be projected onto a 20-foot moon suspended next to the statue.

Bathroom urinals will look like saxophones and the toilets will look like tubas. The faucets will play *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, as guests wash their hands.

The menu will include dishes from each of the cities Morgan visited in the book, including New York strip steaks, New Orleans jambalaya, London fish and chips, Cuban pork sandwiches and French pastries. A retail store will sell Aerobleu books and CDs, as well as souvenirs from Max Morgan's travels.



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Aerobleu is designed to resemble jazz clubs of the early to mid 20th century.

Even the employees will get in on the theme, telling their own stories about Morgan. One waiter might tell his customers that Morgan is meeting with Fidel Castro in Havana, then a waitress will say Morgan's wife just called to say they're at a steakhouse in New York.

"The places we build are highly themed and very well thought out," Schussler said. "We come up with the attraction first, then develop the restaurant and retail to go with it."

Although the Las Vegas tourism and hospitality industry has struggled during the recession, Vegas restaurant consultant Elizabeth Blau believes the downturn will be short-lived. The key for new restaurants, she said, is to have a prime location and unique concept, like Aerobleu does.

"It's perfect for Las Vegas because we're not only the gaming capital of the United States, but we're also the entertainment capital," Blau said. "This concept is fun. There's absolutely no reason why this won't be a huge success."

Aerobleu's biggest challenge will be to generate the sales volume needed to offset its significant development costs, said Dave Brennan, co-director of the Institute for Retailing Excellence at the University of St. Thomas. However, the restaurant's location, diverse flavors and live music should attract a more upscale crowd than some other concepts on the Vegas strip. "It might appeal to some of the older, more mature audiences, and I think that's a pretty good alignment with New York-New York."

Schussler believes Aerobleu has the potential to be "one of the top restaurants in the country," and he eventually hopes to expand the concept to about a half dozen sites around the world, targeting the markets from the book, such as Paris and London.

"What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas — except for Aerobleu," he said. "It's so cool it has to go elsewhere."

jvomhof@bizjournals.com | (612) 288-2101