

C.J.: 'Prehistoric dining' next big thing from Rainforest founder

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T-Rex, pull up a rock and feel right at home in **Steve Schussler's** new theme restaurant.

The founder of the Rainforest Cafes has signed deals to open T-Rex, his new concept restaurants at two locations. Bloomington's Mall of America gets the first one, in May 2005, and a second is scheduled to open later next year at the Legends, a new Kansas City, Kan., mall being built. Schussler will unveil T-Rex at a news conference today in K.C., where Hard Rock Cafe founder **Isaac Tigrett** reportedly is scheduled to reveal a new concept for that restaurant.

The three-story T-Rex restaurants will occupy about 20,000 square feet of dining, shopping, exploring and kiddie dinosaur digging space at the MOA.

It's not just a prehistoric family dining adventure, but "Edutainment," Schussler has been saying for months.

"This concept is more educational and has longer legs and a longer life span," he said Tuesday. Dinosaurs have always been popular and so have prehistoric times. The idea is to be able to tie it into educating and entertaining kids."

Paleontology students will work out of the dig area, where kids will be taught about the artifacts they unearth.

"No one has ever explored the educational and entertainment arena of prehistoric times like this. And built around [the themes of] water, fire and ice and phenomenal food I think it's going to be pretty incredible," said Schussler.

He's called in one of the big guns to enhance the eats.

Rich Melman, from Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises in Chicago, one of the top restaurateurs in the country, is teaming up with me so that we dazzle the world. He's famous for concepts like Maggiano's, Corner Bakery, Tucci Benucch, Big Bowl, Twin City Grill, Wildfire -- all these are [just the Melman restaurants] in the Twin Cities. He is one of the most prolific purveyors of food concepts in the world, and I wanted to team up with him so I could take my food to a totally different level and still be able to concentrate on the education and WOW aspects of the concept. Teaming up with him is really going to set the restaurant industry on fire."

Schussler transformed his St. Louis Park home into the prototype for the Rainforest, but he needed much more laboratory space for T-Rex. (Rainforest Cafes produced 43 restaurants -- 35 in the U.S. and eight overseas -- in seven years, said Schussler, who sold that concept in 2000.)

A couple years ago had the pants scared off me at the T-Rex lab staged in a warehouse behind the Golden Valley offices of Schussler Creative.

Walking into the warehouse was like stepping back into prehistoric times. A feeling of dampness and sounds of water falling overcomes you when entering the darkened cavernous prototype, the specifics of which Schussler did not share beforehand. When "The Mad Scientist," Schussler, turned up the soft green lights I realized the humidity was coming from geysers, waterfalls and ice caves. It took a few minutes to identify the gigantic forms that my eyes couldn't quite make out in poor lighting. They were life-size dinosaurs that were unfortunately automated, thanks to the mechanical magic of Schussler's *creature keeper*, **Dave Flom**. One of Schussler's favorite pranks was manipulating the controls so that the head of the Apatosaurus would swoop after anyone following the labyrinth that took you past the roomful of mechanical dinos.

Seeing Mr. Apatosaurus in my peripheral vision, I ducked out of his way as Schussler guffawed wildly. *About a year later another amusement victim nearly required Depends to survive the attack of the Apatosaurus.*

There was a time, I was worried that the UPS man would blow the cover on what Schussler promised would be my exclusive on the new concept, which was already well known among his chums.

"The UPS guy was delivering packages when he didn't have any," Schussler said Tuesday. "I made him sign a confidentiality agreement, too. You're the only one who didn't sign one." Hey, I can keep a secret the size of Schussler's T-Rex.

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