

The Age of DINOSAURS

Steven Schussler's T-Rex hopes to transport guests to prehistoric times.



BY MARY BOLTZ CHAPMAN

Picture a jungle scene with overgrown plants fighting for space, mist billowing and the sounds of birds, insects and creatures you can't identify. Suddenly a dinosaur steps into view, swinging its giant head and roaring menacingly.

No, it's not the trailer for the next *Jurassic Park* movie, and it's likely not coming soon to a town near you. It's T-Rex, the latest creation of Steven Schussler, the mind behind Rainforest Cafe.

Objective: Edutainment

More than Rainforest Cafe on steroids ("It's 25 steps, if not 1,000, above what I created at Rainforest," Schussler says), T-Rex is dubbed as a "prehistoric family adventure." The concept will feature automated dinosaurs, geysers, flames, waterfalls and ice caves. Children will be able to unearth real bones and fossils, some millions of years old, in a mock dig with the help of paleontology students.

"It's where whimsicality and reality meet to educate and entertain," Schussler says. "And feed you some of the best food you ever tasted."

T-Rex is slated to debut at the Mall of America in May 2005 in a 20,000-square-foot, three-story anchor location. The second unit will occupy space at the The Legends in Kansas City, Kan., a 750,000-square-foot destination development in the city's Village West area, scheduled to open late in 2005.

Schussler says key to the concept's success will be controlled expansion. He expects to open no more than 10 in the

country, sticking to tourist areas that are close to family-populated cities. He hopes each year to welcome 3,000 schoolchildren on educational field trips. "It's a whole other meal period," he says.

Prehistoric Evolution

While Schussler famously built Rainforest Cafe in his own home, T-Rex is evolving in warehouses behind his Golden Valley, Minn., office. He says he began developing the concept in 1996, and since has spent about \$6 million researching and building it.

Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises Inc. founder Rich Melman is helping to develop the eclectic bill of fare. It's not ready for discussion, but Schussler gives as an example the history of pizza, where options would be cooked in brick ovens. The menu will pick up on the concept's themes of water, fire and ice. "The food will be great, but the presentation will be different from what anyone's seen before," he boasts.

The 2,500-square-foot retail area with 5,000 SKUs should garner about a quarter of a unit's sales. Food and beverage will make up 65 percent to 70 percent, Schussler says, noting that there will be no admission fees.

Schussler is still working on new elements for T-Rex, including Hollywood special effects. A GPS locator attached to children will allow parents to relax while their kids are off playing and learning. He's developing characters with personalities and says he's been approached to do a TV show for kids. Also on the drawing board are a laser light show and a parade. **CL**

SNAPSHOT

CONCEPT

T-Rex

HEADQUARTERS

Golden Valley, Minn.

AVERAGE UNIT VOLUME

\$12 million*

AVERAGE CHECK

\$17.50

(company estimate)

EXPANSION PLANS

First to open May 2005

*Chain Leader estimate

T-Rex will continue to evolve until it debuts next spring, says founder Steven Schussler.