

RESTAURANTS

Rainforest founder plots big return

BY ELLEN P. GABLER
STAFF REPORTER

Walt Disney, Willy Wonka: Move over. Steve Schussler is back.

The founder of Rainforest Café is again dreaming big — this time positioning Tyrannosaurus Rex, hot dogs, ivory statues, Asian puppets and Harry Potter as the fixtures for his newest lineup of themed restaurants.

For years Schussler has twirled the concepts for seven separate restaurants in his mind. Now, he's ready to act. The first concept — T-Rex — will debut in Kansas

City, Mo., this fall, with additional sites slated for the Mall of America, Las Vegas and five other cities.

His six other concepts — Hot Dog Hall of Fame, Asia, China, Children in Motion, Aerobleu and Harry Potter — all will open in various locations later on.

Described by Schussler as “entertainment and education,” each restaurant will spare no expense in creating the ultimate dining experience.

Every T-Rex restaurant, for example, will cost a minimum of \$15 million to build.

Some would say that's a bit steep for a restaurant. What does Schussler think?

“The thing I hate the most is when someone says I can't do something.”

Achieving the “can't-be-done” is indicative of Schussler's personality. At one point, the man whose accent comes straight from Queens had 40 tropical birds, two tortoises and a baboon living in his St. Louis Park

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Steve Schussler, who invented Rainforest Café, is about to unleash seven new theme-restaurant concepts on the world.



SCHUSSLER: Creator of Rainforest Café runs idea factory full of life-sized dinosaurs and ivory statues

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home — all to convince investors Rainforest Café was the next big thing.

This time around, Schussler has his own self-financed laboratory in Golden Valley, complete with roaring dinosaurs, manufactured snow and statues circa 1600 to give potential business partners a glimpse into his mind.

Since selling Rainforest Café five years ago, Schussler has immersed himself in research and design. The result? An army of ideas and two warehouses in Golden Valley that would make Pee Wee Herman and Willy Wonka green with envy.

Think a tangible version of Jurassic Park, with a "life-sized" Tyrannosaurus Rex standing amid glaciers, torches and flying dinosaurs.

A look inside

In his office, sporting tinted blue glasses, Schussler constantly calls out to his left brain — also known as his assistant Kari Honoroff — to remind him where he tasted his favorite hot dog or who he's meeting at 4 p.m.

Among a sea of plastic cartoon figures, a Godzilla DVD and models of giant bugs, however, there is an element of order.

With a staff of 10 — selected from the original employees at Rainforest Café — Schussler formed Schussler Creative in 2000. Ever since, the team has been working on his seven concepts, searching the world for each restaurant's perfect components.

"Every field has its experts — every discipline, every commodity," said Helmut Lange, Schussler's vice president of retail. "We look for the best of the information."

The team has figured out 22 ways to make snow, 10 ways to do fire. They've gone to Asia, China and Brazil in search of dinosaur eggs, gemstones and 22-foot doorways. Schussler has

STEVE SCHUSSLER

Title: Chairman

Business: Schussler Creative Inc.; Golden Valley

Age: 49

Education: Two years, Miami-Dade Community College

Background: Founder of Rainforest Café and JukeBox Saturday Night; former radio and TV ad salesman

Hobbies: Downhill skiing, horseback riding, mountain bike riding, tennis

spent hours on the phone with J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series, since one concept centers on the young wizard.

In one of the Golden Valley warehouses, Schussler has more than 50 ivory statues of ships, knights and horses from the Qing Dynasty — pieces he's collected since he was 19.

It's all part of an exhaustive style of R&D.

"The research is so intense, it gives people a headache," Schussler said.

Throbbing heads or not, Schussler's employees and supporters constantly back him.

"I always think he can't outdo what he's done," said Julie Varney, production procurement manager at Schussler Creative. "But he'll do it again. I can't imagine him not doing it again."

A look back

Schussler isn't a rookie at dreaming big.

In 1994, he convinced Lyle Berman, founder of Grand Casino Inc., to invest \$3.2 million in the first Rainforest Café.

The tropical restaurant — boasting snapping crocodiles, thunderstorms and waterfalls — made big waves. The wait for a table sometimes stretched to four hours. A year later, with its sole restaurant located at the Mall of America, Rainforest Café went public. Throughout the next seven years, shares rose

into the mid-\$30s, and the company expanded to 45 stores throughout the world. But by the time Schussler and his partners sold the company in 2000 for \$125 million to what is now Landry's Restaurants Inc., shares had fallen to \$3.25 each.

Analysts say themed restaurants are notorious for showing up big, then petering out after two or three years as public interest wanes.

"If it's too much on the entertainment side, it becomes too much like a theme park," said Ron Paul, president and CEO of Technomic Inc., a Chicago-based restaurant consulting firm. "You don't go there that much."

Customers also have a perception — whether based on fact or not — that food at themed restaurants isn't worth the cost, Paul said.

But Schussler (of course) has a different idea. The food at his new restaurants will not be good, it'll be great, he said. And this time, strategic partnerships are a business priority. For all seven concepts, Schussler is partnering with Levy Restaurants, a Chicago-based restaurant and hospitality management firm. He's also bringing retailers in on the action. Major electronics manufacturer LG Electronics Inc. is set to provide Zenith flat-screen monitors for dino-education, and Schussler is working on Land Rover to put an SUV in every T-Rex restaurant.

Those who know Schussler and his work say he's learned from the Rainforest days and is ready to build an even bigger success. Dave Anderson, founder of Eden Prairie-based Famous Dave's of America Inc. and Rainforest Café's third-largest investor, said Schussler's new concepts have legs.

"I think Steve's approach is a sound approach, in building into a solid market and building strong concepts rather than rushing out and diluting the concept," Anderson said.

Schussler's experience with Rainforest will

MORE...

Schussler's seven new restaurant concepts:

T-Rex A Prehistoric Family Adventure, eating and shopping. Locations planned in Kansas City, Mo., opening Oct. 2005; Bloomington (Mall of America); Orlando, Fla.; Las Vegas; Los Angeles; Niagara Falls; Connecticut (dates TBD)

Asia "Asian fusion." Asian food and decor — puppets, antiques. Locations to be determined; opening August or September 2006

China Upscale. White table cloths, orchestra, ivory statues from the Qing Dynasty. Locations planned in Las Vegas, New York and Orlando. Opening dates to be determined.

Hot Dog Hall of Fame Hot dogs, sausages and their fixings from all around the world. Locations planned in Orlando, New York and Los Angeles; a "major theme park" as well as baseball parks throughout the U.S.; openings in 2007

Children in Motion Mother and child focus, hundreds of bronze statues in green-grass setting. Extensive children's menu, lighter fare. Locations, timeline to be determined.

Harry Potter Magic, renaissance decor and food. Locations planned in major theme parks in and out of the U.S.; opening in 2007

Arobleu Paris: 1939-1959. Upscale, live jazz, martinis and sushi. Location planned on Las Vegas strip; opening fourth quarter of 2006

take him far, Anderson said.

But the real success, he maintains, is in the man.

"I think someone like Steve is such a gift to the world. Someone who can think outside the box and see things other people don't see is a real talent."