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## DINING WITH DINOSAURS

*Founder of Rainforest Cafe opens new restaurant attraction with prehistoric theme.*

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Since he sold his wildly successful Rainforest Café business, Steve Schussler has been digging up restaurant concepts left and right, and the first one is about to come to life with a Midwest location. T-Rex, a restaurant and retail concept with a theatrical dinosaur theme, will open at The Legends, a new 750,000-square-foot center in Kansas City, Kansas' Village West in early 2006.

Schussler has high hopes for the oversized concept, which was 12 years in the making. And why shouldn't he? Rainforest Café, his original themed attraction, reached 45 locations in 7 years and went public with only one store open. It's the only restaurant company in the world to have opened in every Disney theme park.

But when Schussler decided it was time to diversify, his board of directors at Rainforest Café disagreed. So in 2000, he sold the business to Landry's Seafood

Restaurants and created Schussler Creative, a Golden Valley, Minnesota-based company he describes as a "laboratory and imagineering shop unlike anything else in the industry." Schussler and his 11-person team now spend hours upon hours on research and development of unique restaurant and entertainment concepts. T-Rex is the first brainchild to make it out the door. The unique multi-level attraction will include opportunities for "kids" ages 3 to 103 to eat, shop, dine, explore and discover.

"I like to say reality and whimsicality meet to educate, entertain and create," Schussler says of T-Rex.

The concept, built around themes of water, fire and ice, recreates different environments in which dinosaurs existed. Each environment will be enhanced with life-sized animatronic dinosaurs, which come to life in waterfalls, geysers and ice caves. And there are educational opportunities at every turn.



The first T-Rex restaurant will open in Kansas City, Kansas, in early 2006.

"This is edutainment. It is a whole new area," Schussler says. "No one in this business has ever done anything with education and entertainment together." Children and adults side-by-side can mine for minerals and dig up fossils (which they get to keep) or, with the help of a student paleontologist, work on taking the matrix away from real fossil bones. T-Rex also will host field trips during the morning hours where school children will meet with authors and handle fossils from 65 million to 300 million years old.

"People come out for the wow factor, then come back for great quality food," Schussler says. "We've been experimenting with food, not only in how we prepare it, but in how we serve it; it will probably be the most unique in the industry." Schussler is working with Chicago-based The Levy Company to develop a menu for the ages.

The food at T-Rex will be prepared three ways — flame seared, heat seared and stone seared — and will include everything from pizza to sushi to vegetarian and vegan dishes (very important, because dinosaur diets consisted of vegetarians and non-vegetarians). The average check will be \$17.50.

"If a restaurant is heavily themed and a big-box, there's a perception among food critics that the food can't be great," Schussler says. "But I defy any restaurant critic in the world to taste our food. There won't be anything better."

At first glance, T-Rex may appear to be only targeting the family demographic, but the restaurant also will cater to twenty-somethings with its unique bar atmosphere.

"I want young adults to feel that they can have a drink and not feel like they are in a family atmosphere that makes them uncomfortable," Schussler says. The bar will continue the fire and ice

theme and offer food and drinks in unique ways, such as a martini luge or sushi served on blocks of ice

The concept will also include 2,500 square feet of retail space with hand-made fixtures and theatrical lighting and product development. Retail offerings, some of which can run up to \$30,000, will include everything from minerals and fossils to household items, clothing, jewelry, photography, toys and games.

T-Rex will be working with NASA (the restaurant attraction will have the world's largest display of meteorites) as well as science museums and other strategic partners to market the concept, which Schussler plans to expand up to eight locations in the United States.

"Our business plan and mission statement is to keep these at a very low number," Schussler says. "Some of the Rainforest Café locations we opened in the United States weren't as heavily dense and populated and didn't have the tourist component that is so important in a big-box operation. And I would rather have this concept be more rare than something that's all over the place." For T-Rex to have a 30-year or 40-year lifespan, the restaurants must be located next to an attraction or in an area that traffics at least 15 million people a year.

So far, T-Rex restaurants, which will range in size between 21,000 square feet and 40,000 square feet, are planned for Los Angeles, Orlando, Minneapolis, New York City, Kansas City and Las Vegas. Most of the locations will be free standing, Schussler says, except for a site planned at the Mall of America and the possibility of an attachment to a hotel.

"This is an exciting place," he says. "T-Rex offers something for everyone and the opportunity for families to go to the same place to have great food, a great time and an interactive and educational experience at the same time." □