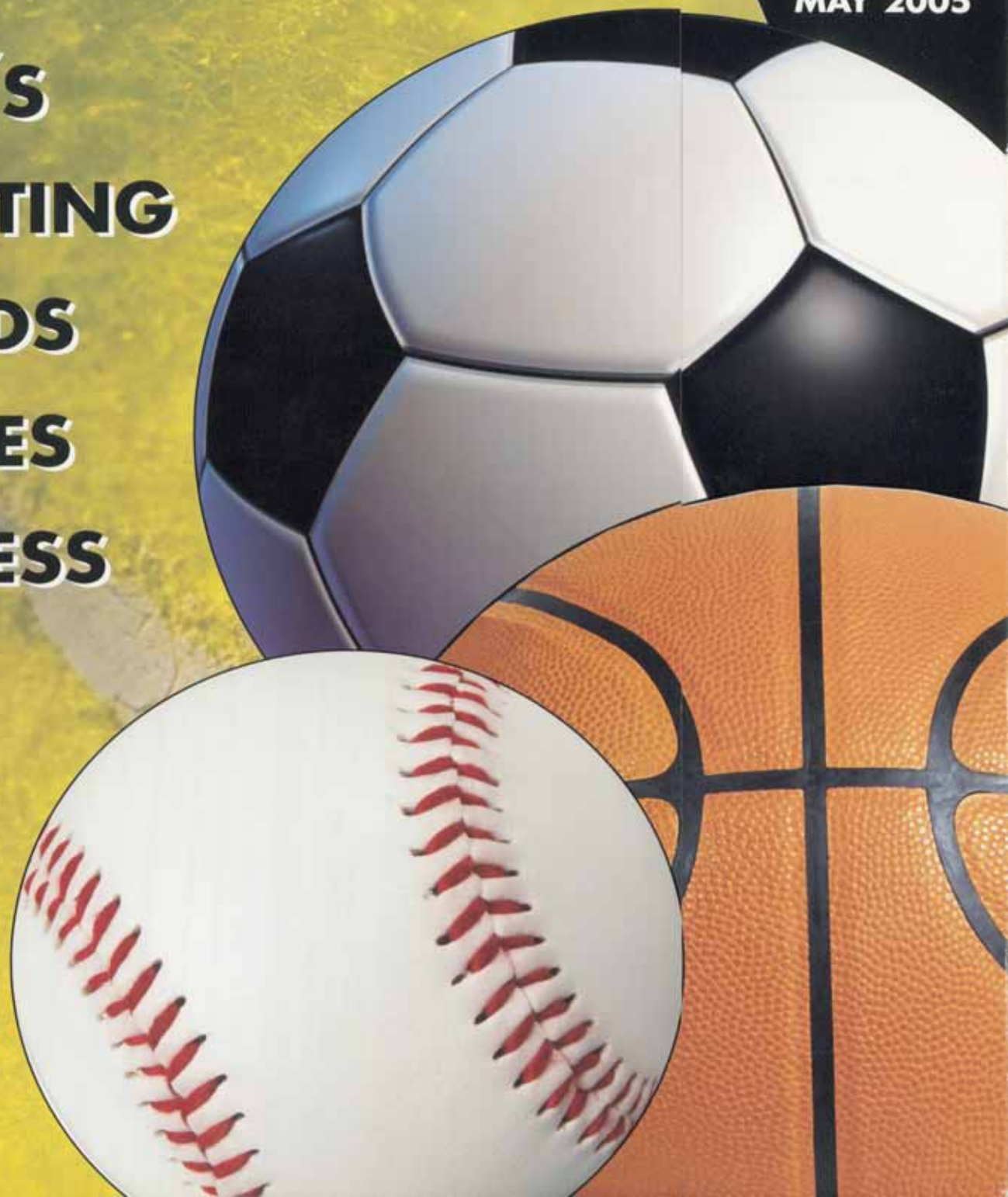


LEADING THE WAY THROUGH THE 21ST CENTURY

# SHOPPING CENTER BUSINESS™

MAY 2005

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# Restaurant Thinktank

Rainforest Café founder tweaks seven new theatrical food concepts.

Susan H. Fishman

While many restaurateurs are busy perfecting their one winning concept, Steve Schussler, creator of Rainforest Café, is hunkered down in his “laboratory,” researching more than a handful of new restaurant ideas at once. The master juggler currently has seven bigger-than-life themed restaurant concepts in the works that will burst into major markets early next year. Eleven full-time employees have been mad at work in the company’s warehouse in Minneapolis for 5 years, experimenting with everything from Paris in the 1940s to the Ching Dynasty.

“Some companies have a test kitchen in their corporate headquarters, but none have built and furnished and manned a laboratory that has been in business for R&D exclusively for 5



The first concept that Schussler Creative will open will be T-Rex, a dinosaur-themed destination restaurant.

years,” says Schussler, who thinks the phrase “diversify your portfolio” extends beyond the financial world. In fact, it’s why the tireless entrepreneur decided to sell his original venture, Rainforest Café, to Landry’s Seafood Restaurants and form Schussler Creative in 2000 – so he could tackle a variety of projects at one time.

Diversification is also what inspires Schussler’s multi-level team, which can work on four or five projects simultaneously. Their ideas come mainly from focus groups and are followed up with extensive research and design. Schussler and his group have been researching dinosaurs for 12 years for the company’s first concept, T-Rex, a restaurant and retail concept with a theatrical dinosaur theme. Built around themes of water, fire and ice, T-Rex 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. It’s what Schussler calls “edutainment” and, like some of his other new concepts, will offer things like field trips, guest speakers and retail stores. Schussler is also working on bringing in major retail players, such as LG Electronics Inc., to provide flat-screen TVs for dinosaur education, and Land Rover, to put an SUV in every T-Rex restaurant.

In addition to T-Rex, Schussler Creative has been on a worldwide research mission for its new restaurant concepts, which include an upscale jazz club, an Asian Fusion concept, a restaurant with upscale Chinese décor and cuisine, a Hot Dog Hall of Fame, a celebration of children, and a place that combines magic and the Renaissance. But these places are about more than just the “theme,” promises Schussler. The food, he says, is the company’s primary concern, as it fights the common perception that good



Children in Motion represents a collection of music and fantasy complemented by bronze statuettes of children in motion intertwined with botanical gardens, fresh flowers and live soothing music. There is a mother-and-child focus, five children’s menus, and lighter fare.



Aerobleu represents an era of jazz and mystique from 1939 to 1959.

Unlike the smoky red carpeted, underground jazz rooms; Aerobleu's creator and designer, Brooks Branch, says Schussler Creative has recreated a marvelous setting that pays homage to the style and grace of the most elegant period of music and décor in the modern era. Aerobleu will attract jazz lovers and musicians from around the world.

quality food and themes do not go hand in hand. To help prove the naysayers wrong, Schussler Creative has partnered with Levy Restaurants, a Chicago-based restaurant and hospitality management firm. Forty-nine percent of Levy Restaurants is owned by Compass, which is the world's largest provider of food service.

"People are always questioning the viability of themed restaurants because of the Planet Hollywoods falling out of grace," says Schussler. "They think you're spending more time on theatrics than on good quality food, but that couldn't be further from the truth. I like to say that our guests come once for the 'wow' factor, but they come back for good quality food and service."

For example, T-Rex will feature three varying and unique methods of cooking, including stone-seared cooking (cooking on a stone that's 5 feet above

## STRAIGHT FROM THE FACTORY

Schussler Creative's new themed restaurant concepts include:

**T-REX:** Dinosaur theme, built around water, fire and ice. Children and adults together 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. Only eight locations total are planned, starting with the first one at The Legends in Kansas City, scheduled for February 2006. The next location is scheduled for October 2006, in Orlando, Florida.

**MAGIC & RENAISSANCE:** Inspired by J.K. Rowling and the series of *Harry Potter* books. Will offer group seating or "community dining" in a castle-like setting with dressed-up servers in wardrobes of the period and Renaissance retail offerings, including swords, helmets and pewter cups and goblets.

"There are 21 Renaissance festivals around the United States, so it's a huge concept," says Schussler. Locations are planned for Orlando, Las Vegas, New York and Los Angeles, starting in 2007.

**AEROBLEU:** Think Paris from 1939 to 1959. An upscale live jazz club — but not your typical jazz club, which is usually dark and underground. This one's upstairs and upbeat with sophisticated theatrical lighting, and will serve \$13 to \$15 martinis.

"I like to say it's martinis and sushi," says Schussler.

The high-class club will feature beautiful bronze statues of some of the most famous jazz players and sophisticated retail items from Paris, Havana, New York and New Orleans. The food will be from those locations as well. The first location is scheduled to open in Las Vegas in 2007.

**HOT DOG HALL OF FAME:** Literally, hot dogs from all over the world. Will also serve perogies and 40 to 50 different relishes, mustards and ketchups. The décor is based on strategic partners, who are also the suppliers, and hot dog memorabilia. The first location, which will be 10,000 square feet, will open in Orlando, then Schussler's hope is to license 300- to 500-square-foot locations to stadiums, theaters and big concessions all over the U.S.

**CHINA:** Upscale with white tablecloths, orchestra and 200-year-old ivory and elephant bone statues from the Ching Dynasty. Fine theatrical architectural lighting and authentic Chinese retail offerings. First location planned for Orlando or Las Vegas in late 2006.

**ASIAN-FUSION:** Asian décor with hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of Asian antiques. Around 2,500 square feet of retail with everything from sushi plates and chopsticks to fine teapots. Features a stone fountain with original stones exclusive to a special river in India.

"That's how much detail is going into this," notes Schussler. "No one would ever think we would go that far."

Locations to be determined for August or September 2006 opening.

**CHILDREN IN MOTION:** A family concept, especially for mothers and children. A celebration of children and life with hundreds of bronze sculptures of children in motion, set in lush green gardens. Lighter fare is served on white tablecloths, featuring interesting salads and soups and a children's menu, which is offered at every concept, with the exception of Aerobleu. Locations planned for Las Vegas and New York.



China will be upscale dining, white tablecloths and orchestral music — with a rich and colorful history carved into ivory statues, tusks and life-size Imperial soldiers on horseback help the past come alive.



Hot Dog Hall of Fame will be a unique and innovative approach to serving hot dogs, sausages, pickles, relishes and dumplings from all over the world. Schussler Creative's unique collection of hot dog memorabilia, mustards, ketchups, pickles and relishes will please hot dog lovers from around the world.

ground with 12 inches of flame all the way around it so every inch of the flame has the same temperature), flame-seared cooking and heat-seared cooking. There will also be an open kitchen, which is rarely, if ever, found in a themed restaurant. The food will take on an element of each individual restaurant theme, in both presentation and in the actual items themselves, such as a meat loaf served up with an attitude by a Renaissance character donning the regalia of the period.

"It's important that the palate, the nose and the eye meet," notes Schussler.

The restaurants will also cater to vegetarians, as well as non-vegetarians, and will accommodate people with special food requirements (due to allergies and intolerance).

And to bring in those customers, only the hottest locations in the world will do. They will have a minimum of 15 million visitors, will be high-trafficked and will be multi-diverse in terms of education, income, gender and race. Schussler likes to say the demographic profile is "from age 3 to 103." For the most part, the company is looking for free-standing locations that are high tourist attractions and have significant retail. It's also extremely important to find sites and landlords that will help the company keep down the level of expenditures.

"It's extremely expensive to run one of these," notes Schussler. "We have more personnel, with curators, educators, historians, authors — it's a whole different level of looking at the business. So that means that a landlord has to look at us differently — not just as an attraction. For example, T-Rex is an attraction that happens to have a restaurant and a retail store, but we're not looking at those things as afterthoughts."

So far, Schussler plans to take his new concepts to Los Angeles, Orlando, New York, Las Vegas and Minnesota. He plans to limit the number of locations to two or three for some of the concepts and, typically, no more than eight for others.

"I think that sometimes limiting your growth is also healthy," he notes. **SCB**



Schussler Creative's Asian concept represents good food with an Asian fusion component decorated with antiques, drama, running water and theatrical lighting.