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The concept for Rainforest Café creator Steve Schussler's new themed restaurant is as old as the dinosaurs — and he's damn proud of it.



INDUSTRY PEOPLE

Once bitten

T-Rex is what's next for Rainforest Café founder Steve Schussler

BY SASCHA BRODSKY

Entrepreneur Steve Schussler was zooming down a dusty highway in the South Dakota Badlands last year when his career took a sharp turn. As his custom black-and-chrome Harley sped through the desolate, eroded hills once stalked by the infamous *Tyrannosaurus rex*, Schussler asked himself, "Why not create a line of dinosaur-themed restaurants?"

Why not, indeed. The 49-year-old had already made his mark on the restaurant sector. In 1994 he created the Rainforest Café, a jungle-dining phenomenon that became a sought-after anchor for retail and entertainment developments. Schussler sold the company in 2000 to Houston-based Landry's Restaurants for \$125 million. Since then, he says, with time and money on his hands, he has been hatching his next big idea: T-Rex Café.

The first T-Rex will open next January at The Legends at Village West, a 750,000-square-foot shopping-entertainment complex in Kansas City, Kan. Seven more will follow within a year — one in Mall of America and the rest in high-traffic shopping centers in Las Vegas; Los Angeles; New York City; Niagara Falls, N.Y.; Orlando, Fla.; and Connecticut. The restaurants, which will cost at least \$15 million each to build and span between 15,000 and 40,000 square feet, will feature mood-setting decorations such as a life-size *Tyrannosaurus* and flaming torches along the walls.

Schussler says he has hired a paleontologist as a consultant and visited museums around the country to examine dinosaur fossils. "What makes these restaurants different is that they will be edutainment," he said in the accent of his native Queens, New York.

Critics have doubts about themed restaurants because they say diners have little reason to return after their initial experience of the gimmick. Schussler is betting against that prevailing wisdom and signing 20-year leases anyway. The food at T-Rex, he says, will surpass what themed restaurants have offered in the past.

Schussler has joined with Chicago-based Levy Restaurants, one of the country's largest restaurant companies, to handle the food end of the business. The emphasis will be on flame-broiled foods to give the restaurants a "primitive" appeal, he says. "We are going to have a good selection of vegetarian foods for the noncarnivorous dinosaur-loving types," Schussler said. "We are also thinking up recipes for dinosaur martinis, because we want this to be a family-friendly place, but also a place where adults can have a good time."

And yet the food is not to be the main attraction. In fact, the T-Rex concept sounds more like a museum than a restaurant, and that is because Schussler planned it that way. "There will be two-and-a-half-hour tours for grade schools," he said. "This will be a learning experience where there will also be speeches by lecturers or authors."

NASA and companies like Microsoft will be showcasing their programs and products at the restaurants, he says. "I want my customers to come away

from a night at the T-Rex cafés feeling like they have not only had a fantastic time, but they also learned something."

For such a big dreamer, Schussler's beginnings seem remarkably small. He started out working as a waiter at his family's restaurant in New York City. Later he sold radio advertising and then took a job in Minneapolis running a chain of restaurants called Jukebox Saturday Night. When that business failed in 1991, he dreamed up the idea of a restaurant that would look like a rain forest. Today Schussler lives in St. Louis Park, Minn., with eight tropical birds and a Saint Bernard. He is single, though he has a girlfriend he met (appropriately) at a restaurant.

In its heyday, Rainforest Café comprised some 40 units and posted about \$100 million annually. Today there are 34 of them. Schussler says he hopes T-Rex will reach that point and even surpass it. "There's a huge market out there for an experience like this, and it's not going to be a one-hit wonder," he said. "It's a concept that's going to last." ■

