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PHOTOS COURTESY SCHUSSLER CREATIVE

T-Rex concept developer Steve Schussler with animated figure

## Dining with dinosaurs at Disney

New themed restaurant signals a makeover for Pleasure Island.

BY BOB MERVINE | STAFF WRITER

LAKE BUENA VISTA — Plans to build two major themed restaurants at Walt Disney World may offer a peek behind the curtain of silence Disney has imposed on its plans to remake Pleasure Island.

T-Rex: A Prehistoric Family Adventure, opening in early 2008, is a 600-seat, dinosaur-themed establishment. It marks the next step in the company's plans for Downtown Disney, a 31-year-old restaurant/retail center that occupies 120 acres.

Jacob DiPietre, a Disney spokes-

man, confirms the restaurant, to be located adjacent to Pleasure Island, will be a cornerstone of a makeover but would not elaborate about the project.

Landry's Restaurants Inc.,

PLEASE SEE DINOSAURS, PAGE 61

# DINOSAURS: Plans for new themed restaurant at Disney include a robotic bartender

Continued from page 1

which is based in Houston, will bear the cost of building a \$25 million T-Rex restaurant, paying Disney a fee to operate for 20 years. Landry's also plans to open a 600-seat, Asian-themed restaurant inside Animal Kingdom by summer 2007.

Landry's operates Rainforest Cafe locations at Downtown Disney, Disney's Animal Kingdom and Disney's California Adventure.

The T-Rex concept was developed by Steve Schussler, who founded the Rainforest Cafe chain that he sold to Landry's for \$85 million in 2000.

Tillman Fortito, Landry's chairman and chief executive officer, says his company is re-engineering Schussler's preliminary concepts to make them more efficient, similar to the retrofitting the company did after buying Rainforest from him.

"In Orlando, there will be less bar and more dining," he says, noting the Disney audience "isn't a drinking crowd."

Fortito, who says Landry's has had preliminary conversations with Disney about a second restaurant in California, adds that he would not have done the deal with Schussler without the Disney location.

## 'Huge' Disney makeover

Schussler believes the Pleasure Island makeover is designed to streamline customer flow, extend the amount of time visitors spend shopping, eating and nightclub hopping, and attract more family visits.

Schussler couldn't be too specific about Disney's plans, saying only that part of the work will involve changing the way traffic will flow.

"The (Disney) makeover project is very huge," says Schussler. "They



COURTESY SCHUSSLER CREATIVE

T-Rex Restaurant to feature waterfalls, dinosaurs and geysers

## Landry's Restaurants Inc.

**Headquarters:** Houston

**Core business:** Developer of restaurant concepts

**Local presence:** Ten in Central Florida, including two Rainforest Cafes, four Joe's Crab Shacks, one Landry's Seafood, a Chart House in Daytona Beach and two The Crab Shacks

**Stock:** (NYSE: LNY)

**Financials:** (2004): earned \$66.5 million on \$1.17 billion in revenue

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have some very aggressive plans. The strength of the T-Rex project is one reason for their commitment."

His company, Schussler Creative Inc. of Golden Valley, Minn., has been developing restaurant concepts for 15 years.

Landry's paid Schussler \$7.6 million for 80 percent of the rights to T-Rex and another Asian concept, with an option to purchase the remaining 20 percent

for up to \$35 million more, if the chain turns \$20 million in total profit. The deal allows Schussler to build eight T-Rex locations domestically and nine more outside the United States.

Schussler calls the T-Rex restaurant a combination tourist attraction, restaurant and retail store that will appeal to a wide range of customers.

"It's where whimsicality meets reality," says Schussler.

## Sheets of flame, geysers

Plans also call for dramatic lighting and landscaping, combined with an outdoor water feature. The new two-story, 25,000-square-foot building will be located on the fringe of Pleasure Island.

Schussler describes the concept as having a dramatic entrance with a view of an open kitchen, where woks, open-hearth ovens, rotisseries and wood-fired grills provide the vision of sheets of flame to arriving guests.

Several different themed dining areas, one of which will feature a live shark tank as its centerpiece, connect

with seven activity areas. Each space is filled with a junglelike environment, populated with more than a dozen dinosaurs, plus waterfalls and geysers.

Unique to Orlando will be the Ice Room, a 20-degree vodka bar with a robotic bartender, working side-by-side with a human counterpart preparing drinks.

Among the unusual retail components is a licensing agreement with Build-A-Bear Workshop Inc. to develop Build-A-Dino, complete with components for eight dinosaur figures.

## Site near Everest village

In addition, Schussler has developed a second concept that Disney is moving on immediately.

Schussler's Asia concept, which combines a 250-seat quick-serve, walk-up restaurant with a 350-seat table service restaurant, is planned for the area adjacent to the new Expedition Everest village in Disney's Animal Kingdom park.

Disney has yet to come up with a name for the eateries, but the titles will likely connect with the mythical Himalayan village of Serka Zong, the nonexistent Anandapur Rail Service that carries thrill ride guests up the mountain or one or more imaginary characters such as Norbu and Bob, the misplaced duo that operate the mountain climbing service.

Restaurant industry observers say while the ideas are intriguing, and Landry's and Disney make a good team, this doesn't signal the return of the themed restaurant to the industry.

"Landry's has a record of success with Rainforest. They like the themed concepts and do well with them," says Mike Gallo, an analyst from C.L. King & Co. "I can't think of a better place for something like this than Disney, because kids are king when it comes to dining decisions."